

WHAT SPINS AWAY

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What Spins Away is a novel about a man named Caleb who, in the process, of searching for a brother who has been missing for ten years, discovers that his inability to commit to a job or his primary relationships is both the result of his history with that older missing brother, and his own misconceptions about the meaning of that history. On a formal level, the novel explores the ability of traditional narrative structures to carry postmodern themes. The theme, in this case, is the struggle for a stable identity when there is no stable community against which or in relationship to an identity might be defined.

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PREFACE

Identity and the Stable Community

Long narratives often trace the development of identity, and they do so in specific ways, namely, they create situations in which main characters are pulled in two (or more) directions due to obligation and desire, or to put it more abstractly, the way in which their identity forms out of the pull of their individual sensibilities and desires and the pull of the requirements of the community to which they belong. Postcolonial novels are especially good at highlighting this particular tension. Mr. Fielding's struggle in Forster's *A Passage to India* is between, on the one hand, his own sympathy for and kinship with Dr. Aziz, and on the other, the legacy and ties he inherits from the culture of upper middle class British Empire. Okonkwo's son Nwoye in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is caught between the gentle self he finds echoed in Christian culture, and Igbo warrior stoicism. One of the things distinguishing these novels as postcolonial is the sense that, often enough, the characters are not only caught between a private vision and a communal necessity, but between two competing communal necessities. To find a niche in one is to betray another, and thus a postcolonial character's identity is never quite complete.

In order for novels to work as narratives of identity formation, authors have often assumed or presented a stable, monolithic community against which individual characters can define themselves. Cervantes' Don Quixote seems to readers, at first, a foolish old Romantic in direct proportion to the distance he travels away from the harsh realities of

mundane Spanish life. It's not until Jane Eyre gains wealth through inheritance, and marriage to Rochester's good name that her novel can successfully conclude. Levin, in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, becomes himself when he subsumes his identity into that of the communal, peasant countryside, while Anna, who moves further and further away from her community, like Emma Bovary, reaches the logical end of a progression away from community: death. The pattern is well known. Characters either marry, produce children, work hard, participate in the economic system of the day, and abide, at least outwardly, with the prevailing morality, or they die.

American novels and certainly modernist novels, seem, at first, a violation of this general case because so many of the characters neither die, nor find an integrated niche within a larger community. Instead, they tend to find a place on the outskirts of a conventional society, much as Hester Prynne inhabits the forests around Salem in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, or Melville's Ishmael, in *Moby Dick*, after a too long stint among the conventions of the East Coast, must cast himself into the hellish nightmare of a whaling voyage. The publication history of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* illustrates the extent to which the publishing industry is aware of this tendency of American characters to find the kind of social stability available to their European counterparts. Burgess, a British writer, ends his version of the novel with the delinquent Alex eventually leaving his adolescence behind to marry and settle down. This last chapter was dropped in the American edition, leaving Alex an unrepentant outlaw delinquent, a calculated move on the part of the American publishers in order to appeal to Americans at a time when Marlon Brando, James Dean and the Beat Generation evoked

afresh the mythic American Loner. For Americans, the state of being outside is, in a sense, a conventional culture, the relationship between individuality and community eternally at odds. Regardless of whether or not a main character rejoins a community, identity formation is set off by the foil of a stable, monolithic “society.”

In fictions which assume a stable society (good or bad) and an unstable identity, the anxiety expressed by the novel is centered on the identity of the individual rather than on the identity of the community. The reader is anxious (and titillated) by the distance or difference between these two aspects of self. For instance, in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, the interest and tension in the novel is not at all due to plot considerations, but to the distance Edna travels (revealed by means of the plot) from the life of the conventional housewife she has lived to that of a woman uninterested in the conventionalities of stable married love, or children. The ending of that novel disturbs us (leaves us at a high point in this curve of anxiety) if we see Edna’s suicide as a permanent departure from her community (as with Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina), or satisfies us (relieves our anxiety, slightly) if we see her suicide as the ultimate expression of the individual identity over an unacceptable communal identity (as with Hester Prynne). The fact that Edna has to achieve this by death is the horror of the book and reveals much about the times in which it was written, but it also points out that the power of the novel stems from the assumption that the community she finds herself at odds with is *so* stable and monolithic that there is no getting away from it *except* by death or isolation.

The modernists dealt with these same sorts of issues, largely by also considering community as something inherent and stable, something one develops (as a novel

progresses) a relationship with which is never easy. This is exacerbated by the modernist tendency to find particularly awful communities, such as the chaos of post World War I of the European upper middle classes and petty nobility embodied by Dr. O'Connor and Baron Felix Volkbein in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* or the philistines in Joyce's *Dubliners*. While modernists, such as Woolf and Joyce do not allow their main characters to join with their communities, preferring, like most American fiction (and perhaps because of the influence of American fiction) to allow them a life on the outskirts (the obvious example being Stephen Daedalus in both *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*), they do seem to want them to exist as alternatives to what seems to be, as in Flaubert and Chopin, an impassive, static middle-class community consisting of form for form's sake. If the community is the letter of the law, modernist main characters (or heroic artists) hope to develop the spirit of the law and, like Christ amid the Pharisees, they must separate themselves from it, become revolutionaries, exiles, rejecters of the status quo. What remains constant across all these novels is the use of a stable community against which their authors define the identity of their characters, be they rebels, exiles, or mature members of society.

Identity and the Unstable Community

The postmodernists have taken the literary anxiety of individual vs. community identity formation one step further by calling attention to the fact that any given community, and any given identity, is merely an arbitrary construction. A given community's appeal to certain universal values, discovered and justified by science or religion or common sense or tradition, are seen as at worst arbitrary, at best

circumstantial, and more often than not, a result of the efforts of the stronger to exert power over the weaker. This perception generates a sense of anxiety and/or despair or the sense of manic play which arises out of the feeling that there is, finally, no value structure to which writers can appeal, no monolithic community against which their characters, by means of cause and effect, might be revealed.

While in older novels one could contrast the unstable individual against a stable society, postmodernists have asserted that when both individuals and communities are equally unstable, there is no room for narrative, or rather, no room for any particular narrative. What makes the character of Emma Bovary so vivid to generations of readers is how out of tune she is with the realities of the provincial and middle class France. If Flaubert believed Emma's version of France was as true as Homais', her very identity, for readers, would disappear.

Because identity is predicated on arbitrary narrative structures, postmodernists are likely to feel that a depiction of a stable identity reached by a character at novel's end is false, and to depict such things in fiction is to manipulate readers by means of a literary power play, to trick them by means of literary devices based on a model of reality no longer true.

What postmodernists anxious over the instability of communities are left with is something like Kathy Acker's novel *My Mother: Demonology*. Acker dispenses with narrative in any cause/effect sense, and instead throws her readers a pastiche of scenarios loosely based on past novels, such as *Great Expectations* or *Wuthering Heights*. Her characters are echoes of narrative templates. Exactly *which* narrative template depends,

in this novel, on the men her narrator is involved with. Prototypically postmodern, Acker doesn't subscribe to any essentialist notions, even for the sake of giving her readers something to hold on to. If there is anything stable in an Acker novel, it is a reader's sense of what *isn't* present: narrative conventions. The meaning is not in the imitations of actions, but in our recognition that form is violated.

Unlike Acker, Salman Rushdie, in *Midnight's Children*, does provide a narrative structure for readers to hold on to, but like Acker, he also plays with the mutual instability of both community and individual. Saleem Sinai does not develop or grow into an identity which is at least partly his own, but instead contains within him all the identities of the struggling, newly independent India. Indeed, if the novel traces a development of anything, it is the disintegration of individual and community, of, ultimately, the efficacy of a concept of identity at all insofar as the concept can exist as a metaphor for India. Saleem Sinai, at the novel's end, is about to break into pieces, a postmodern ending similar to another great postmodern novel of community, Gabriel García-Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which ends with pieces of Macondo blown away on a strong wind like a movie set in a hurricane.

A Way Out?

Writers cannot undo the insights of the writers who precede them. They can no sooner ignore the myth of a monolithic community than they can ignore the earlier insight that characters often act upon motives hidden even from themselves, or that heavy-handed omniscient narrators hinder more than help their stories. What's at stake, then, is how this postmodern insight, can be re-incorporated into what it has disrupted,

the traditional methods of narrative, plot, character, and mimesis. The key to the solution is to recognize that the outward forms of community are not necessarily equivalent to the intangible “spirit” of community.

For example, if religion is considered the very skeleton upon which community hangs, when religion fails (as it seemed to for those who thought of Darwin’s theories and the geological age of the universe as somehow proof of Christianity’s falsehood), community dies. If extended families are the bedrock of community, when family members move to other states and countries, community crumbles. If blood ties are the basis for the bonds of community, divorces, foster children, stepchildren, stepparents and adoptions untie them. When these things are seen as not only the means of community, but community itself, their disappearance or reconfiguration can only lead to the idea that communities are inherently unstable in the modern world.

The way out is to focus on that aspect of community which is intangible, to allow the word community to express a certain essential need or capacity in humans. Novelists, then, have several choices: to arbitrarily create a community for the sake of coherence, or to keep in mind that even if they wish to present unstable communities in their novels, they can use this very instability to dramatize that despite the fact that the tangible aspects of communities change, the intangible aspects remain constant. While characters have always forged or discovered their identities through the action of their plots, through their relationships with other characters, and against the backdrop of a monolithic community, I now see that there is an opportunity to dramatize characters who *form* the communities they want to be a part of or define themselves against. It is possible to

embrace the notion that in a good novel, a community is as much defined by the characters who create and maintain or destroy it as characters are defined by the communities who create, maintain or destroy them. Instead of breaking narrative structures in order to move the drama of unstable communities to the level of the writer trying to write in an unstable world, it is possible to move this drama back into mimetic narrative, back into the realm of characters trying to satisfy their need for community in a world which constantly reminds them that community is all too often fleeting.

The Importance of Being Narrative

One of Aristotle's points in the *Poetics*, a point of great contention in the Modernist and Postmodernist eras, is his assertion that "a tragedy cannot exist without a plot, but it can without characters" (27). This is based on his notion that tragedy imitates actions that have, can, or should happen, which in turn is based on his notion that 1) imitation is a fundamental function of human beings, that 2) it is the means by which they learn, and that 3), learning is pleasurable (20). In order for human beings to imitate, they must first see the actions of other human beings in response to the world around them. Therefore, by imitating action on the stage (whether that stage is literal, as in the drama, or figurative, as in a fictional scene), an artist presents a set of actions upon which the minds of the audience can engage in the pleasurable exercise of the learning muscle.

As in the everyday world, people learn about a family member or a friend by the kinds of actions they perform over time in response to others and to a landscape, so do people learn about the inner thoughts, sensibilities or moral conditions of others not by

what they say, but by what they do in spite of what they've said. It is by means of plot that we discover character, and it is by means of character that plot has meaning.

By emphasizing that the imitation of actions upon the stage is an occasion for learning (as distinct from an occasion for preaching), Aristotle agrees across the millennia with Annie Dillard when she says, in *Living By Fiction*, that “fiction is not so much an interpretation (except insofar as everything is) as it is an object for future interpretation” (152). In other words, fiction presents a subset of the world, and like the world itself, it can be interpreted, and that interpretation is, as Aristotle suggests, a pleasure.

In *On Moral Fiction*, John Gardner puts this another way. “The good writer,” he says, “provides his reader, consciously and to some extent mechanically, with a dramatic equivalent of the intellectual process he himself went through” (114). The operative word here is “equivalent.” When connected to Aristotle’s notion that it is as pleasurable to learn from imitated action as it is from real action, and with Dillard’s fairly common notion that fiction is an occasion for interpretation, it’s possible to assume that mimetic fiction is capable of evoking in readers just about any meaning a writer might sense, even if that meaning is that “meaning” is difficult to come by, and fleeting at best.

Even E. M. Forster, who, as a modernist, is interested in all those aspects of human beings which are not represented in actions (namely, the ebb and flow of consciousness), nevertheless, in *Aspects of the Novel*, implicitly agrees with Aristotle when he acknowledges that plot appeals to curiosity, intelligence and memory (87-88). For Forster, a good plot is one in which events follow one another causally (the king died,

and later the queen died of grief), but more importantly, a good plot contains mystery (the king died, the queen died, how are these two events causally connected?). Readers need intelligence to anticipate that they will eventually discover the connection between two events, and they need memory in order to recall that there are events which have not yet been explained. They must be able to apprehend a series of events in time, hold them suspended in their minds until they discover the causal chains connecting them. Readers, in doing this, in being engaged in life and in art, are learning one of the human animal's chief pleasures. Forster's dismissal of plot, I think, is not a dismissal of cause and effect, or of imitation of actions—his novels are full of these things—but of the bending of all other aspects of the novel to the often mechanical engine of the plot.

What this all adds up to is the notion, as stated above, that traditional narrative can convey as much postmodern angst as can be conveyed by the absence or breaking of traditional narrative, and in fact, does so by appealing to the imitative, learning functions natural to human beings. By this means, it is possible to allow readers to be emotionally as well as intellectually engaged in characters suffering from postmodern dilemmas.

These issues, seemingly very distant from the day to day task of writing a novel, came to a head in the composition of *What Spins Away* when I decided to switch the narrative from the first person point of view to the third. My first conception of the novel had to do with the issues I raised above in the sense that I wanted Caleb to be an active participant in creating the communities he was rejecting, and that he wanted to be a part of. I decided that the best way to do this was to make Caleb the first person narrator of the novel so that I could dramatize his active interpretation of the world around him, his

conscious formation of the kind of community he wanted to be a part of. Like Gardner's good writer, I wanted to present the dramatic equivalent of Caleb's process of thought, and I wanted Caleb's process of thought as well. I ended up with exactly what I wanted, which turned out to be Caleb as not much more than a postmodern author creating his narrative out of the fragments he had to work with, and then violating that narrative when he needed to. In the same way that some postmodern works, such as Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*, and to a lesser extent, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, seem to be teaching us something rather than allowing us to learn, my first version of the novel wasn't about the drama as it happened, but about Caleb's need to teach the reader the meaning of the drama. It wasn't as obvious as a fable with a moral at the end, but the effect was the same.

My realization was that I could present the same thematic content using far more traditional means. By switching to a limited third person narrator, by letting Caleb's movement through the groups of people in the story stand on its own, I found that I could dramatize a postmodern theme without using postmodern techniques. Traditional narrative as it has evolved into the last moment of the Twentieth Century is flexible enough to encompass even the most antitraditional and antinarrative themes. While literary writers might no longer dramatize the formation of a character's identity against the backdrop of a stable, monolithic community, they can instead dramatize the fluidity of communal and individual identity against the backdrop of stable narrative forms.

Community Formation in *What Spins Away*

What I'm ultimately after is not so much a return to a writer's ability to feel at home in a stable world, but a moving forward to the ability to feel at home in an unstable world. If postmodernism is some sense the antithesis of the thesis of traditional narrative, the next step, the synthesis, is to embrace the use of stable form in order to illustrate unstable human institutions. On a thematic level, this is what I've tried to embody in *What Spins Away*.

The story dramatizes Caleb's search for community, his desire to create a community, and finally his acknowledgement of the community he has actually created as opposed to the one he thought he was creating. (In this way, Caleb's desires and resignations mirror my own process of composition.) At the novel's beginning, Caleb finds himself part of a community with Michelle in New York. He works at his job, gets along with Michelle, truly loves her, in fact, but in a way he can't fathom, this community fails him. It seems that his own growing abdication of responsibility is, in some way, an unconscious effort to jettison this community and move on to another. Still, he doesn't move until his Mother calls with news that Caleb's oldest brother Raymond may appear at his oldest sister Leah's wedding. In going from New York to California, and then Oregon, Caleb abandons a community he has created (though he doesn't know this until near the end of the novel) for the one he grew up in.

At home with his family, several things, as far as community is concerned, are at stake. First, Caleb learns that most of his family suspects that the "special bond" between Raymond and Caleb resulted in or from Raymond molesting Caleb, and then

disappearing a couple of years after that. This revelation, ultimately not true, jeopardizes Caleb's idea that if he can find Raymond and "be" in the community which will produce for him the identity he wants, something that enables him to be stable, to sustain a sense of continuity in his own life.

After this revelation, and perhaps because of it, Caleb begins to realize that his family, an alternative community, one that he has been largely unconscious of as the novel progresses, is not what he thought it was. His brothers and sisters have dispersed and are living largely independent lives not only in terms of geography, but in terms of needs and desires. Micah is a writer haunted by the death of a lover's child. He has chosen to absent the "community" component from his own identity until Caleb forces him to interact with Noah's children, at which point he begins the process of forming a community himself. Rachel finds that her relationship with her boyfriend Halsey, first because of dope, then because of a pregnancy, has severely hampered her mathematical genius. She must choose, near the end of the novel, what she wants, a family, with the risk of losing her abilities, or an isolated life. When Caleb puts the question to her explicitly, she chooses to rejoin (or rather, to reform) a community. Caleb's lesbian half-sister Leah, in marrying a man, has lost the community of lesbians she was a part of (dramatized by the fact that none of her friends show up for her shower or her wedding). Caleb's other half-sister, Hannah, having drifted into her own mind to such a point that she had become largely absent from her marriage chooses to imagine the marriage back together again. Caleb's parents, whose community was their family for so many years, agree amicably to dissolve it, Caleb's father moving north toward Canada, Hannah,

Raymond and Caleb, and his mother moving south, toward Noah, Sheila and Micah.

Noah, the oldest of Caleb's full brothers, has, from the beginning, fiercely defended his notion of the nuclear family as the community that matters to him, resenting all aspersions cast at him, playful or otherwise. Finally, there's Michelle, Caleb's girlfriend from New York, who struggles despite Caleb's tendency toward detachment, to maintain the core of her community, her relationship with him. Caleb, for most of the novel, desires Michelle, but ends up allowing her to spin away, as does everyone else who has mattered to him.

Caleb finally meets Raymond, driven by his need to find the kind of person he needs to be with—the part of his identity that consists of others—but in the end, Raymond slips out in the night and Caleb is content to let him go. What Caleb has come to recognize is that there is no one community for him, that, finally, his legacy, from Raymond as much as from anyone, is to drift from one community to the next, to see the communal aspect of his identity as fluid. *My aim is to show this ending as bittersweet, bitter in the sense that Raymond wasn't the community Caleb thought he might be, but sweet in the sense that for some people, for Caleb, at least, this fluidity of identity, the stability of individual sensibility, the instability of progressive communities, is not an occasion to despair, but allows, in perhaps the best Romantic sense, for moments of joy.*

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CHAPTER 1

IT WAS HIS sister Rachel who first set off the tremor of doubt in Caleb's mind.

They were in Northern California when it happened, on the edge of an island just off the shore of Lake Shasta. It was a late summer evening and they had left the campsite separately after night had fallen, not intending to meet, but here they were, crouching by the water's edge. Across the lake, RVs squatted like a row of buffalos staring down predators, and behind them, a distant parking lot light burned atop a giant pole.

"He kind of creeped me out," Rachel said. Her dark straight hair fell around her thin face, over her narrow shoulders. She picked up a flat rock, fit it tightly between her thumb and index finger, whipped it across the lake's surface where it skipped into the darkness, never sinking, as far as Caleb could see.

He picked up a similar rock and imitated her. The rock skipped once, then sank with an audible plop. The RVs, their seams gleaming fluorescent blue or incandescent yellow, waited, Caleb thought, like a panel of silent judges.

"There were just these times," Rachel said, "when he'd watch me working at the kitchen table. I was nine, you know."

"Ten," Caleb said.

"Whatever," Rachel said. "I'd be drawing shapes, you know, the way I used to do, and he'd watch me from the couch, just sit there and stare at me."

"That sounds like Raymond," Caleb said.

“If that had happened now,” Rachel said. “I mean, if I were sitting here now, and he was here, like where you are, staring at me in that same way, I’d know what was on his mind. And that would creep me out.”

“What are you saying?” Caleb said.

Rachel whip-cracked another rock across the water, seven skips into the darkness. Caleb imagined that at the end of its run, the very end, the rock had set itself gently on the water, suspended briefly by surface tension before folding under.

“I guess I’m not saying anything,” Rachel said.

“You’re saying it was something sexual, aren’t you,” Caleb said.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Rachel said.

“Something scary, then,” Caleb said. “Something psycho.”

“I’m not saying that either,” Rachel said. “I’m not saying anything. I don’t know why I brought it up. Just a thought. You know how when you think things, they sound perfectly reasonable, and then when you speak them, you realize what an idiot you are?”

“You’re not an idiot,” Caleb said, but he believed her, that she didn’t mean it, that she had only been caught up in their older brother Noah’s bitterness from earlier that day. Noah hated Raymond because Raymond never paid attention to him. Raymond never stared at him for long periods of time. Never said cryptic things to him. Never tried to test him, or put him in weird situations. They had maintained an uneasy silence in each other’s presence, or, as far as Caleb was concerned, an uneasy presence for Noah, a non-existent one for Raymond. The fact that Raymond had paid attention exclusively to Caleb whenever Noah was around had been a great source of pride for Caleb.

“If Raymond were a stranger,” Caleb said, “and he stared at you like that, you’d have a right to assume something nasty, but by the time you were old enough, if he wouldn’t have disappeared, you’d have known why he was staring. You’d have known.”

“You’re right,” Rachel said.

“He’s not like other people,” Caleb said. “He *knows* things. He has a plan. He’s developing his consciousness.”

“You talk like he’s still alive.”

“He’s going to be at the wedding. I’m sure of it.”

But he wasn’t sure of it, not anymore, not after Rachel admitted that at least for a moment—a long time ago, ten years, now, since Raymond had disappeared, and two or three years before that—Raymond had scared her, had given her the kind of creeps women knew about in the presence of certain men. When Caleb was fourteen, he went on a field trip to Mount Hood. The bus rumbled and swayed, soothing him into a half-awake state, his eyes open, but unfocussed. “Quit looking at me,” a girl three rows up and across the aisle had said, breaking him into full consciousness. “Look at him! He’s *staring* at me. What a creep.” Misunderstandings grew in the driest of soil. What Caleb wasn’t sure of, watching the RV’s glare, listening to Rachel zing rock after rock into the lake, was why Rachel’s words, of all the opinions about Raymond he’d heard over the past few days, struck something inside him.

He hadn’t thought about Raymond since he’d gone to New York, though in a way, his leaving Oregon had been in unconscious imitation of him. When things had then gone from good to bad, and from bad to worse, when he’d been unable to hold a job

for no other reason than he couldn't get to it on time, when his girlfriend began to ask, with greater frequency, "what are you thinking about?" or "is there something wrong?" or "whenever you come over, whenever you're here in my one apartment, on my own couch, I feel like I don't even *exist*," even when all this had happened, he hadn't thought of Raymond.

And then his mother called from Oregon, one Sunday evening, the only time he'd raise himself to answer the phone. He thought she was going to talk seriously about his increasing use of the credit card she'd slipped him when he'd left. He regretted the sound of her voice, thought about hanging up before she said the second syllable of his name. Instead, she called to invite, then implore, and finally threaten him to come out to a wedding. No more money if he wasn't going to be part of the family. She wasn't going to pay for his exile. Besides, his oldest sister, Leah, at thirty-seven, and for twenty years a vocal and apparently political Lesbian, had decided to get married to a grizzled old lawyer (his mother's words), named Lloyd. Wasn't that interesting enough to return home for? Caleb loved his family whenever he thought of them, but the oddity of his sister's newest surprise wasn't enough to nudge him out of the apathy he had, for no reason he could understand, sunk into as swiftly and surely as a rock in a lake.

Then his mother said that Raymond might be there.

"Raymond?" Caleb said.

"Well," she said, her voice softening, growing quiet, as if she didn't want anyone on her end of the line to hear. "I don't really know for sure."

“Mom,” Caleb said. “Mom, I know you wouldn’t make that up. Have you heard something? Did he call? A letter?”

“No,” she said. “Nothing like that. In fact, I shouldn’t really have said anything. I shouldn’t have even mentioned it.”

This evasion wasn’t like her, even though she seemed the type of woman who might find clever ways to discover the hidden agendas she looked as if she suspected were all around her. She was thin, nervous, white-skinned. Her eyes moved back and forth, up and down, as if she were scanning a room like a nervous deer, certain something toothy waited nearby. She wore nice dresses, even if she didn’t plan to leave the house. She wore a pearl necklace, most of the time. She liked to drink gin and tonics, or sometimes just water, as if what was important to her was not the alcohol, but the glass in her hand, the faintly clinking ice as she moved. She was always about to speak, her mouth opening, her body leaning forward, but she never did, or rarely, and never sarcastically, never with an air of martyrdom, never with words anyone could construe as an attempt to assign guilt. But she looked the part.

“You heard something,” Caleb said. “Tell me, Mother.”

“Oh, I can never refuse you, Caleb,” she said. “It was Hannah. She was down here for a visit just after Leah broke the news and she said something about Raymond, about seeing him, somewhere in Canada, you know, where she was on one of those filthy digs, and she found herself talking to this man, and then somehow she got the idea it was Raymond. She said she didn’t recognize him, at first. She said she wasn’t sure.” Hannah was only a year younger than Leah. She, along with Raymond, (who had been

seven when Hannah was born), were the product of Caleb's father's first marriage. They were his mother's step-children, though not quite young enough to be. Hannah was smaller and thinner than Leah, and as quiet and academic as Leah was loud and political. She had married a clean living, vegetarian health food store owner named Bob, who loved to play Frisbee and cultivate his bushy beard. "I like people to think I'm just in from the desert," he'd told Caleb once, "that I might have a few teenaged groupies stashed out there?" Hannah, at these moments, frowned, muttered something about "the real world," and "the facts," then retreated to her study to hover over books, lit in the room's darkness by a single, yellow lamp. She was not one for speculation, for imagining anything she couldn't find the evidence for. If she hadn't thought the man was Raymond, she wouldn't have mentioned it.

Caleb said as much to his mother. "Besides," he continued, "He wouldn't show himself unless he were ready to come back."

"That's what *she* thought," his mother said.

"What do *you* think?" Caleb said.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, adopting a wispy, exhausted tone. Caleb held the line, waiting. The phone sat on the arm of his couch, the only piece of furniture in his entire apartment except for a small table next to the radiator. When he first met Michelle, his girlfriend, she'd been appalled at his Spartan condition, and had given him the table and the plant on the top of it. "You need something living," she said. "Living things are good." He'd watered the plant twice a week, writing the dates down on a slip of paper so he'd remember when he'd last done it. But over the past several months, he'd lost

interest. One day, without even thinking, he'd folded the paper into an airplane and sent it out the window, watched it fall into the well-like courtyard, spiraling down twelve floors until it came to rest on a pile of broken glass. Then he stopped watering the plant. He woke up one morning, saw the plant's leaves drooping, like a crowd of polite New Yorkers looking for a contact lens. All that day he had drifted in and out of sleep, half remembering he was supposed to be at work, and the crowd stooped lower and lower, searching for that lens. Caleb had been unwilling to get a glass of water. Unwilling to get out of bed. The next morning, the crowd of helpful citizens had turned into a giant brown spider, frozen, dead. At twenty-five, and without any apparent strain or effort, he had exhausted his life.

“Well, you know,” his mother said, “I thought Raymond was dead. I still do. And Hannah's been under a lot of stress, lately. She didn't get tenure, you know.”

“But she said she *saw* him?”

“She said she *thought* she *might* have seen him.”

His mother's tentativeness and apparent willingness to manipulate him aside, he was sure that something was going to happen at this wedding, and that what was going to happen was Raymond. Just the sound of his name, just the promise of his return had snapped him out of his malaise. How could the magic of that be fake? How could it mean something other than his oldest, most loved brother was going to come home, going to cure him?

This certainty remained unshaken as he scheduled a plane to Denver, where he met up with Micah, his reclusive, science fiction writing brother. He'd infected Micah

with his own excitement, which had carried them to San Francisco where he, and Micah and Rachel and Noah, the oldest of his mother's children, the next youngest after Hannah, were to meet. Rachel and her boyfriend Halsey, both of whom had flown in the day before from Florida, where Rachel attended graduate school, picked them up from the airport, and though he detected a certain tension in the car, and might normally have assumed that it was because of him, his anticipation that he would find Raymond, would be able to ask him questions, just *talk* to him as an adult kept him aloof, safe. Even Noah's sour mood, as they traveled north to Lake Shasta for a couple of day's camping, even Micah's apprehension around Noah's children had buzzed the air around him. He remained untouched. If there had been a tremor before the tremor, it might have been Sheila, Noah's wife. She seemed apprehensive around Caleb, talking animatedly when he saw her from a distance, not at all when he neared her or her children, as if she had been and always was talking behind his back.

Rachel's admission, or whatever it was, had reminded him of Sheila's response, though when he thought of Raymond, pictured his goofy grin, his large ears, these thoughts, these apprehensions and qualifications and fears made no sense to him. He put his hands in the water. "Still warm," he said.

"All that house boat pee," Rachel said.

He jerked his hands out, flicked his fingers at her. She laughed, stood, backed away. He laughed, too, but remained crouched as he looked across the water at the parking lot light, at the countless white insects swirling beneath it in a cloud so random it

seemed, after all, planned. “What would those bugs be doing if it weren’t for that light?” he said. “Sleeping?”

“Probably so,” Rachel said.

“Millions of years of evolution,” Caleb said. “They know how to navigate by the light of the sun. They find each other, find food, fly in straight lines because the sun’s so far away. And then one day, there it is, come down to Earth. They burn themselves out, I bet.”

“Maybe it’s heaven,” Rachel said. “Maybe it’s like the second coming. God returns.”

“An electric light?”

“Maybe all of human history and development, from a bug’s perspective, is Providence operating through Nature to bring the species to this moment—apotheosis in a parking lot.” Her voice was sarcastic, mocking. This was the kind of thing Caleb liked to say. Rachel only said it when she knew no one would think that she took such things seriously.

Caleb did take them seriously. He knew that Raymond did as well. He picked up a rock, flung it across the water. Two skips, and on the plop, the parking lot light winked out, turning a dull dying orange, the bugs’ brief ecstasy extinguished. He scooped a handful of water, lifted it, and chased the already fleeing Rachel up the path to the campsite.

“What’s the matter?” he yelled. “Don’t you want to be baptized?”

CHAPTER 2

CALEB'S FIRST YEAR in New York—a city he had come to for no other reason than adventure and a vague longing to move on to something, to move toward something—had been good. He'd refused to spend his mother's money, had walked around the city, found a cheap apartment, got a job at Barnes and Noble based on his father's reputation as a writer of popular history, a creator of quirky television dramas. He met a girl at work, Michelle, and was, he felt, for the first time in his life, in love. At the beginning, a crush, simple and sharp, but the crush lasted and it had seemed after a while that they had become family, as familiar as family, as comfortable, anyway.

The first he'd seen of Michelle was her red hair above the stands in the music department at work. Sometimes he glimpsed her whipping around corners just out of sight, or sitting, back to the store, staring out the coffee shop window at the parking lot. One day they got to talking during breaks about having academic fathers, hers a professor of history who had stuck with it, his a man whose early academic success let to entertainment. Their fathers had bequeathed to them certain traits, they discovered. Overdeveloped vocabularies, for instance. The tendency to qualify and redefine even on the playground. Traits they had to eliminate as they got older and wanted to keep the friends they made. Caleb liked their talks, their occasional meetings for coffee, because he missed his family, Rachel especially, his sister, the only sibling younger than himself, the only one who lived at home with him after Micah left for college. Caleb didn't fall in

love with Michelle, even though she seemed attracted to him, which, for a boy who had spent much of his earlier life overweight, might ordinarily have been enough. Caleb had decided to let his awareness of the potential slide. Friendship was better. It made him feel more grown up, as if the trip to New York had already done what he had wanted: changed things, focused things, gave him the sense that he was moving on.

This need for change was by no means a sharply felt or consciously defined thing for Caleb. As with most things in his life, it seemed vague. He'd gone to college for four years but had not graduated. He had enough credits, but had spread them across too many majors: history, psychology, anthropology, English, philosophy, journalism. He'd spent a large part of his college time reading introductory texts—which he liked better than the more scholarly works his father often recommended—and talking to friends in the cafeteria, lingering over food for hours as successive waves of residents joined and then left from parties, dates, sporting events—studying. He liked to drink beer and “chair” bull sessions in his dorm room. Watch television and engage in critical debates about shows, or imagine that the commercials were parts of the story, commentary in the margins. But throughout all of this, and despite it, perhaps because of it (he wasn't quite sure), he had felt in his last year a certain kind of drifting, had recognized that the drifting had always been a presence in his life, masked by the regulated progress through elementary, junior and senior high school. By the end of his fourth year in college, he'd begun to feel that he was hiding something from himself, that his sense of vague drifting, his sense of marking time before starting a life's work he could not yet imagine could no longer be ignored by means of routine, schedules, classes, meals, friends.

So he had decided, after watching a Woody Allen movie, that New York was sufficiently alien, sufficiently distant, a crucible difficult enough to reduce him down to bare metal, to the essence of whatever he was. Maybe out of that, he reasoned, he could forge the rest of his life, a sense of person, could fill the sense of having forgotten something, having waited for so long he had forgotten what for.

A month after meeting Michelle, he'd forgotten these feelings. How could he have them in a city with so many tall buildings? So many people? So many accents and costumes? A city so vast, yet like a little village, the same people around him everyday? His co-workers at Barnes and Noble, the pregnant woman next door, in her thirties, alone, her long, dark hair threaded gray, the old man who insisted that a young man like Caleb wanted a magazine with naked girls, "What, you too good for the carnal pleasures? A young man like you? Where would we be without the carnal pleasures, I ask you. Where? You like the boys? Is that it? We got what you need. We got the boys, too." And how could he remember why he had come here when every day he imagined where Michelle was when he wasn't with her, which part of the store, for instance, or where she might be shopping, and for what, or how she might be sitting on her couch, the way she liked to, with her legs pulled up, one arm looped over the armrest, a magazine twisted into a cylinder in her other hand. Had he remembered his reason for going to New York, he might have thought, Well, maybe this is it! But he didn't remember, and never thought those thoughts. Not for the first year, anyway.

One day, Caleb found out that Michelle's father knew Caleb's father, that they had gone to graduate school together, had collaborated early on in their careers, pooling

research about early Russian settlements in North America. The discovery accelerated their relationship, or at least broke down their mutual hesitation. There followed a dinner at Michelle's father's house, another at her mother's. Caleb wondered if they were dating, decided to let her make the assumptions. He really did like her. They had kissed after the dinner at her mother's. They had kissed again, in the rain, on the way out of Barnes and Noble one late evening. He had leaned against her in a darkened window just after the kiss, and then she had turned him round so that he was against the window, she on him. He liked the weight of her.

"Come home with me," she said.

She lived in a tiny apartment a few blocks away from the crush of stores where they worked, a nice apartment in an older building, with hardwood floors, a large window overlooking the street where someone had planted large, leafy trees, reminding Caleb of Oregon. That first night the wind spattered rain on the windows like a tentative typist. Caleb and Michelle lay together, pressed side to side. She ran a finger down his chest.

"When I was little," Caleb said, "my oldest brother Raymond told me he was going to show me my ribs."

"They're nice ribs," Michelle said.

"Too padded, I think," Caleb said.

"I like a little meat," Michelle said.

"So," Caleb said. "We were in my parents' bedroom. They had a huge mirror on the inside of the closet door, and Raymond, who was in his twenties, as old as my parents

for all I could tell, gestured for me to come over to the mirror. I bolted for the door. I was scared to death. He grabbed me by the hand, laughing, and dragged me back.”

“Cruel guy,” Michelle said.

“Not really,” Caleb said. “You see, I remembered a model he’d been working on, a skeleton he’d put together, and he’d told me that those bones were inside our bodies. He’d said that if you took the skin off a person, peeled off the muscle, you’d be left with Mr. Thin. That was his name for the skeleton. So when he wanted to show me my ribs, I thought he was going to cut me open. He knew I thought this, which is why he grabbed me. He was going to teach me something. I screamed bloody murder when he dragged me over to the door, opened it up. He had to wrestle me, pull my shirt off, force me to look at the mirror, and then he showed me my ribs.”

“That’s funny,” Michelle said. “Were you always so scared?”

“No,” Caleb said. “Well, maybe.”

A FEW WEEKS later she told him the story that made him fall in love with her. He’d finally asked her if they were, in fact, going out, the maybe-we’ll-eventually-get-married kind of going out and she’d asked him what he thought, and he said he thought that, indeed, they were going out, and she agreed. They were in the stock room unpacking books, running their thumbs along the edges of new books, fanning the smells into their faces. Caleb liked to watch her. Her hair had been curly since he’d met her, but she’d gone in and had something done, and now it was straight. Straight red hair. Tiny strands moved and floated when she fanned a book, and one of them caught on her eyelashes.

“You know,” she said, “when I was eight years old, I was abducted.”

“By aliens?” Caleb said. He thought she was joking, but she spoke too quietly, too evenly, and she wasn’t smiling.

“I don’t really remember any of it,” she said. “I remember my life just before, the school I went to, the friends I had, and I remember afterwards, a different school, and the weird way people looked at me when they found out about had happened from the one or two people who still remembered me, but I get only bits and flashes of what went on in between. I mean, I must have gone to school because I knew lots of things I couldn’t have known at eight, and I was very good at math, for instance, and that had to come from learning it, right? Lots of practice? But my life between eight and twelve, only flashes.”

Caleb held his breath, stood as still as possible. His first thought was that if someone had told him about hearing such a story, he wouldn’t have believed them, would have that the teller was making it up on the spot, only here, in the stock room, not a shred of cynicism. He wanted to hear more. Desperately wanted, his breath shallow, quiet. “Really” he said, softly, not sure if he’d spoken aloud.

“I went to the grocery store with my older brother,” she said. “That’s when it happened. He was thirteen, practically an adult, and after years of avoiding and ignoring me, he started to pay attention, to be a little protective, maybe even patronizing. I liked it. He bought me Cokes. I can still remember the shiny quarters in his hands. He held them out to show me, four silver disks on his dark palm, and in he went. I waited for him on one those tiny merry-go-rounds—you know, the little horses. Even though they were

too small for me, I still liked to sit on them and watch cars drive by, or people walk back and forth with shopping carts, or yappy dogs bark at passersby in their overheated deathtraps. The last thing I saw before I found myself in my parents' car, four years later, was a bag boy pushing an enormous train of shopping carts, the whole thing rolling along like a metallic millipede. That's the last thing I remember, squirming uncomfortably around on a red horse, watching that boy try to maneuver a giant bug, and then it was four years later and my brother, all grown up with a fuzzy moustache, was saying hello to me in the back seat of the car. My parents were in the front, my mother looking stressed and sad. The first thing I noticed was that my hair was longer, curlier, and my father smoked."

Caleb's arms grew sore. He'd been holding a stack of books as she talked, held them standing as still as possible, his body as rigid as a satellite dish. He felt overwhelmed by what she was saying, shocked, even, a little numb, and deep inside, above his stomach, below his lungs, he felt something opening, a sensation both pleasant—he wanted nothing more than to hold on to Michelle as she talked—but also alarming, like a coldness of a damp cave pressing into his skin. He set the books down while Michelle opened another box, began to stack the books on a cart as she talked.

"I remember a huge green pasture," she said. "So huge there were mountains at the other edge which seemed only an inch tall. And there were trees here and there with white flowers on them. I don't remember clouds, from that time, or people. There was a porch you could crawl under where the dirt was cool. I loved to lie there and stare up at the bands of blue light when it wasn't raining. There was a light bulb in a block of wood

with a spinning thing in it, something for the window seal, you know, with a light and a dark side which spin around in the sunlight. That's about it."

All through the rest of the day at work, and through the dinner she cooked for him, and through the movie they'd rented, even after they had discussed the movie, the day's events at work, how Michelle was likely to be appointed the next manager as their current one was making the leap to corporate, he couldn't stop thinking about what had happened to her. How had she felt the moment after it had happened, watching that parking lot recede from the back window of a strange car smelling strongly of aftershave, say, and tobacco. Had she seen her brother come out of the store, the doors sliding open, he emerging, a Coke bottle in each hand, the bill of his baseball cap swinging around, looking for her. Had she seen that? What had gone through her mind? How had it changed her? What would she be like if this hadn't happened? Louder, perhaps? A little more talkative? Caleb had often imagined her feeling as if she were a guest in a new house, the other guests being her new "brothers and sisters," none of whom had problems asking their folks, the kidnappers, for things like candy and allowances. Michelle was quiet, never asked him for even an extra penny at the book store's café, feeling, Caleb now guessed, that at any moment, she might offend, intrude, impose. Did she have a family for those four years? Was she completely alone? Was her kidnapper male or female? The green field she had described seemed a pleasant dream, but pleasant only in the way of horror movie landscapes just before the townspeople or the post-coital campers were about to be rudely awakened. The strips of blue, the space under the porch. Had she been locked under there for days? Tortured or punished? Had she been

kept there while something far worse happened above? Caleb was not prone to speculating about such awful things, but the tone of her voice when she had described what she remembered had stuck with him, had set something vibrating in him that refused to settle. She had been positively wistful describing the blue sky, as if that moment were the moment she had idealized as representing her childhood, when there were no emotional complications, no sense of the sense-of-loss that comes with adulthood. Her version of paradise at the cost of an abduction.

He was still thinking of these things an hour after they made love, the chord running through him still thrumming, still in tune with Michelle's horrifically dreamy voice. Caleb felt again like he had in college, that he was marking time, playacting at life, waiting for the real thing to come along, to happen, whatever that thing was, that Michelle wasn't that thing, but was inextricably linked to it. She had dozed off. He wanted to sleep, too, but he couldn't stop his thoughts. He saw her in new ways—the way she moved around the store almost unseen, just a flash of red here and there. Had she not done the same thing for four years, moved from one moment to the next, detached, fleeting? He found that he liked to think of her like that, fleeting, an impression. Was he himself like that? Was he like her? In this new city, away from friends, away from the weight of his older brothers and sisters, and given the way he and Michelle had gotten together, he thought that after all, it might be true. It clicked for him, the way she liked to stare at parking lots when they went out to dinner or coffee, as if she were in the back seat of a car, watching it recede as if forever. The fact that her parents were divorced, her brother moved to the Midwest, the way she hung up after talking to

them on the phone without a goodbye, an “I love you.” The way she never talked about her past. Something had happened to her. Now, she would always be someone who had had something happen, something mysterious. This knowledge about her, or more accurately, this absence of knowledge, and his desire to know, was, for Caleb, love. He could think of no other word.

“Hey,” she said, turning toward him. “What’s the matter?”

“Can’t sleep,” Caleb said. “I can’t stop thinking about what happened to you.”

She sighed. She rolled away from him. “I shouldn’t have said anything,” she said. “People always think things. Bad things. Abuse. White slavery. Kidnapping. None of those things are true.”

Caleb scooted close to her, embraced her. He wanted to embrace her for the rest of his life. She would never disappear while he was around.

“But you don’t remember,” he said. “How do you know?”

“I know,” she said. “But that doesn’t matter, my knowing. People want to think what they want to think. There is always a story behind the story, people think.”

He held on to her until her cold back matched the heat of his chest. She seemed small in his arms, fragile, but, somehow, larger too, as if the wholeness of her had become smaller, more dense.

“My parents won’t talk about it,” Michelle said, “and my brother lives in Lincoln. He won’t talk about it, either. The whole thing bothers them. Guilt, maybe, or just weirdness.”

“You’re a symbol to them,” Caleb said.

“I am?”

“Whenever they see you,” Caleb said, “they’re reminded how suddenly things can change, how one day, for no understandable reason, a whole part of their life can up and disappear, just leave them at the side of the road.”

“You’re silly,” she said, laughing, her body shaking into his.

A little later, she said, very quietly, as if she was sure he was asleep, “You scare me, to come up with something like that.” When she finally drifted off, her breathing regular and heavy, her feet twitching in dreams, Caleb found that he couldn’t let go of her even though he was hot and there was an annoying layer of sweat between them, even though he didn’t like sleeping on his side.

SHE DID STRANGE things. When it rained for several days the ceiling above the front door sprung a leak which dripped into a cooking pot all morning, all afternoon, and on into the evening. The pot was large, several gallons large, at least, and the slow, steady drops reminded Caleb of something very old and ancient, a cavern under Rome, perhaps, or a ruined castle in Ireland, or the last remains of an ancient water system dripping into an undiscovered pre-Christian crypt. When Caleb returned that evening after buying some dinner bread, he found Michelle in the kitchen hanging loops of string from paper clips she’d thumbtacked to the ceiling.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Hold on,” she said.

She pulled aluminum foil from a box, folded it into a strip, then curved it, made a long funnel. She placed one end under the leak high enough to leave room for the front door to open, the other end in the second loop in the series heading for the sink. She made several as he watched from the blue couch, until she had an aqueduct leading from the front door to the kitchen. She joined him on the couch where he had been watching.

“The manager said he’d be in tomorrow to fix it,” Caleb said. “It isn’t that bad, is it?”

“Sh,” she said, leaning forward.

At first he didn’t hear it, and then he did. The faint tapping of water in the sink. He followed her into the kitchen. She cut a length of string and laid it along the last foil gutter so that it spilled out just as the water did, ending at the bottom of the sink. After a few seconds, the water began to climb down the string. No drips.

She grinned at him.

“Ah,” she said. “Phew!”

Later that night, he could hear rain against the roof, occasionally against the windows, but not a single drop from the leak. Was there a difference? Michelle lay next to him, not quite touching, her presence mostly due to her weight on her old mattress. She was sound asleep and had been since just after dinner, as if solving her problem had enabled her to rest easy. Caleb hadn’t slept at all. He kept thinking about being under a porch, the cool dirt at his back, the faint sound of beetles crawling just out of sight, the strips of blue light above, the sky and the clouds, and he imagined those clouds

thickening until the rain started pattering the deck, then pounding on it as if trying to get in, then the water rushing down, like sheets one after another on parallel clotheslines.

ONE AFTERNOON HE found her sitting in the café, at the small counter facing the parking lot. She had her head on one hand, her other hand around a coffee mug. He ordered, watching her, wondering how she could stare for so long without moving. Was she asleep?

He sat beside her, eased forward to see if her eyes were closed. They weren't. He leaned back, sipped his coffee. He decided to make it a test. Who would speak first? After a few minutes, way too long, he thought, she looked at him, smiled, sipped at her coffee, looked into it, touched her hair, set the cup down, leaned back, put her hands in her pockets, and stared once again.

A white station wagon cruised by. A man on a motorcycle wearing black leather, his helmet's face plate a mirror. A dog, black and tan, sniffed at the air through the tiny, triangular window of an ancient car.

"What are you looking at?" he finally said.

"Nothing," she said, slapping her hand on the counter. "Absolutely nothing. Why do you think I'm always looking at something? That everything I do has some meaning to it?"

"I don't assume that," he said.

"You do," she said. "You can't help it. Christ."

He left his coffee on the counter and walked away as fast as he could. At the stock room, he turned around and went back. He found her still staring at the parking lot, one hand on her cup, her head resting on the other. His cup was gone.

THEY HAD GONE to his apartment for lunch one day and had made love on his old, single bed. They relaxed, listened to the radiator pop and crack as it started up. Caleb went to use the bathroom and when he came back, he found Michelle crouched against the wall he shared with the older woman who had recently had her baby. He pressed his ear against the wall, heard faint murmuring which resolved itself into singing. A sad song, it seemed, something he'd never heard before. Lots of long notes with long O sounds, like "home," "echo," "comb," "old." Beautiful singing, he thought, as random and organized as whale song. He pushed himself away and found Michelle sitting on his bed, pulling on her pants, her socks, crying silently, the tears spotting her jeans, catching her watch and splashing off.

"What's the matter?" he said, putting his arms around her.

"So beautiful," she said. "So scary. I don't ever want to hear that again."

"Really?" he said.

"Promise me Caleb," she said. "Promise me I won't ever have to hear that again."

"I can hardly—"

"Just promise."

"I promise," he said. "Never again."

PERHAPS IT WAS the fact that the air had changed. Caleb woke up moments before his alarm clock, was able to shut it off midway into the first piercing beep. He stretched, started two pieces of toast, pulled open the curtains from the large window next to the radiator. Though it was early morning, the sunlight pouring into his room seemed dark, like late afternoon. He felt energetic. Happy. He wanted to get to work as soon as possible. They were re-shelving the art books, making room for an expanded children's section, a decreased photography section. In the bathroom, he splashed water on his face, pulled his wet hands through his hair and went back out to the window.

As on every morning, he looked at his neighbors' curtains for signs of life. Nothing but cool dark shadows on that side of the building, the sun not yet high enough to burn the people into life. He stretched again. Yawned. Sniffed. Smoke floated down from the ceiling. His toast had burned.

After a shower, a near sprint to work, he slowed down entering the store and caught sight of Michelle at the Literature station. She glanced toward him as he passed, puzzled at first, her eyes official and unseeing, and then she recognized him. She smiled quickly, a shy, closed mouth smile, embarrassed, she seemed, her eyes looking away as if to make sure no one had caught the silent greeting. She stirred something inside him and he liked that stirring. They had a conversation between them, of looks and gestures, of awareness and pattern. A private conversation. No one else knew about it. He liked that. Liked it a lot.

HE BOUGHT A lamp on his way home from work. The days now grew dark before five o'clock in the evening, and with Michele working overtime learning how to be a manager, Caleb spent his time at home. He set the lamp next to the radiator, plugged it in, liked the look of the spot of light on the pale yellow carpet. Liked the radiator's hiss, the faint draft from the big window, warped glass and all.

He found some scissors in the kitchen drawer where he also found some tape. He pulled a stack of old magazines from work into the circle of light and started cutting out pictures. A woman wearing a large floppy hat. A duck. A man winking over a computer. The words "minister," "interrogate," "sea," "byte," "amalgamate." He opened a piece of junk mail, turned over the enclosed letter, taped the pictures and words, untaped, them, rearranged them, turning his head this way and that.

The phone rang.

"Caleb?" Rachel said, slightly breathless, as if she had run to the phone to catch him. "Are things good there?"

"They're good," Caleb said.

"I just had an odd feeling, is all."

"You?"

"I know, I know. Premonitions are bullshit, in my honest opinion."

"Like full moons."

"Yes," she said. "People remember things better when there's a full moon, and assume that more things happen."

"A trick of memory," Caleb said.

“Right,” she said. “How’s work?”

“Great,” he said.

“Michelle?”

“She’s cool,” he said.

“You’re not screwing things up with her, are you?” she said.

“No,” he said.

“And you’re not late to work all the time, are you?”

“No,” he said.

“That’s good,” she said. “I know what you’re like.”

He picked up the paper on which he’d arranged the cutouts and held it at eyelevel, as if checking for flatness. “How are things in Florida?” he said.

“Warm,” she said. “Too many bugs. I miss the cold. I’m lonely.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I have friends. I have colleagues. But I miss the old house. Mom, Dad.”

“Me?” he said.

“Don’t make me say it,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. “And you, you idiot.”

“I haven’t really thought about home since I’ve been here,” Caleb said.

“I don’t believe you,” Rachel said.

“It’s true,” Caleb said.

“Not even me?” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ve thought of you.”

“I worry about you all the time,” Rachel said. “I wonder what’s going to become of you. The way you are with jobs, girlfriends. You’re not lying to me, are you?”

Caleb lifted the paper above his head, lowered it carefully, then shook it. The pictures slid around. He looked at the configuration. Narrowed his eyes. Unfocussed them. A butterfly, he thought. Nazi eagle.

“You’re not very talkative,” Rachel said. “I guess I won’t waste my money.”

“Are you okay?” Caleb said. “Is there something wrong?”

“Why would you say that?” Rachel said.

“A hunch,” Caleb said.

“Why would anything be wrong?” Rachel said. “My life is in order.”

“Oh,” he said.

“You don’t believe me,” she said.

“I do,” he said. “Of anyone I’ve ever known, your life is the most orderly.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean.”

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing at all.”

“Are you saying I’m not spontaneous?”

“Even if I did say that, I don’t think being spontaneous is a good thing.”

“You *better* not,” Rachel said. “What with all the sitting around you’ve done in your life.”

“Okay,” Caleb said.

“Sorry,” Rachel said.

“So things are okay.”

“Yes,” she said. “Just a little lonely.”

“You’ll get over it.”

“I will.”

She hung up and Caleb viewed the paper and cutouts edge on again, inhaled deeply, and blew the shapes into a cloud. He looked at the shapes on the floor, most of them upside down, white human shapes filled with text, and wanted, suddenly, to watch television, to lie in bed, hold up the remote and surf for hours at a time. It was the first time he’d wanted to do this since moving to New York. He didn’t even have a television. During his last year in high school, he’d watched television for hours a day. Rachel couldn’t stop being angry at him for it. His last year of high school, he’d resumed the habit. He went into the kitchen to drink some water and looked out the window. Most of his neighbors’ curtains pulsed blue and white.

The phone rang again. He knew it was Michelle. It was her normal quitting time. He continued to look out the window, listening to the phone ring, then pause, then ring again. The blue curtains were beautiful, he thought, especially the way they shimmered, flat and passive, like water.

IT HAD SEEMED to Caleb that well into his second year in New York—after having been together with Michelle for longer than he’d ever had a girlfriend before, after having kept his job longer than he’d ever had before—that he’d managed to forget all about her

abduction. His worry about her, he thought, had become nothing more than a general concern and consideration. Something he might share, and had shared, with anyone he'd been around for any length of time. But then he had the dream.

It took place in the woods somewhere, though not deep woods, or old woods. Gray and brown dead leaves, scraggily oak trees, tufts of dull yellow grass. Summer, perhaps, or winter after a long, long drought. It seemed to him that he wasn't really in the dream, that it wasn't something happening to him, or about him, or for him. He was out of the picture, as if he were nothing more than a camera, or someone looking through a hole in the fence.

In the center of the campsite lay a black, extinguished fire, large chunks of broken, blackened wood. A man sat on a, a gray, squeaky metal chair left over from World War II. He held a large knife in one hand and carefully pressed it against a long branch, peeling the bark, the top layers. The man wore a brown leather jacket, an old pair of jeans, a scuffed pair of brown work boots. On his head, a fishing hat in the center of which, just above his forehead, sat a large, black eye, the whites barely visible. The man continued to peel the branch, which never grew thinner.

Then Michelle appeared, younger, much younger, her hair strangely blonde. She wore a night gown down to her knees. Her arms were bare. She wore thick glasses and stepped carefully up the path. Behind her, suddenly, a lake appeared, tiny wavelets lapping at her heels. Behind the lake, tall mountains receded until they became small with distance, disappearing finally, making the lake seem an ocean except for the calm water, the barely perceptible waves.

Michelle sat down opposite the man, the blackened pit between them. “I don’t want to go back,” she said.

“You’ll have to,” the man said. His face was covered in the only shadow in the entire sunless landscape. His voice sounded familiar. Too familiar. His father’s? He had thick whiskers reaching from the opening of his shirt to his eyes. A wolf man. A bear. “I’ve got to move on,” the man continued. “And so do you.”

“But I’ll be going backward,” she said.

“No,” he said. “No going back.”

“But my parents, my brother, what’s the point?”

“That’s why you’re going back. That question.”

Michelle stuck her hands in the black ashes and started smearing them on her face, then under her arms, around her knees. She looked as if she were crying ashes, swimming in them. He could no longer see her eyes. “Please,” she said, her voice clogged, her face dry. “I don’t want to go back. It’ll kill me. Don’t send me back there.”

Then the man looked at Caleb, who suddenly found himself in the dream, really here, his left shoulder aching as if from hauling a pack. The man had curly brown hair peaking beneath his hat. He seemed in his forties, his face weathered enough for a man older than him: dark, permanently tanned, but his build, slim, almost skeletal, made him seem younger, almost feminine. “You’ve got to find this guy,” the man said, hooking his thumb toward Caleb.

“I don’t want to,” Michelle said. “I hate him already.”

“No you don’t,” the man said.

“She does,” Caleb said. “I knew it. I remind her of you.”

“Yeah?” the man said. He raised the switch with a turn of his wrist, then whipped it to the ground. “She doesn’t know what she thinks,” he said. “And she won’t remember.” The man stood. He seemed, to Caleb, eight feet tall. He approached. Caleb wanted to back away, but couldn’t. The man was too big. At the moment the man grabbed his wrist, Caleb found himself naked. “Do you want to see your ribs, little boy?” the man said. He knelt down beside a frozen Caleb, slid his thumb along the blade, then pressing it to Caleb, just below the collar bone, and drew it down to his navel. He dropped the knife. With one hand, he gripped Caleb’s shoulder to brace him, and with his other, pulled first one side of his skin, then the other making a sound like stretching saran wrap, exposing his red torso, red meat held back by a cage of white bone.

“Look at this kid,” the man said, grinning at a motionless Michelle. “A regular Mr. Thin!”

ON A COLD day in January, Caleb and Michelle sat on a bench across the street from the Guggenheim. He wore a knit cap she had given him for Christmas, and a scarf, and mittens, and a long coat to cover his legs. If his legs were covered, his thighs, especially, then it was possible to get warm. He was not getting warm.

Michelle’s nose was red, her face white between her own scarf and knit cap. Hers was white with pink spots, had a long tail and a fuzzy ball at the end. Caleb hadn’t seen one like it since childhood.

“I can’t believe you’ve lived here all this time,” Michelle said, “and haven’t been there.”

“Just never really thought about it.”

“Why else come to New York?”

He shrugged. “I guess I didn’t put too much thought into it.”

“Let’s go then,” she said.

“Right now?” he said.

“Let’s just go in right now. I’ve got some money. We can take a look around.”

“You’ve never been there?”

“When I was little.”

“Okay,” he said. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

Michelle stood, brushed off her jacket, though it hadn’t snowed since they sat down. She puffed steam as she worked. She looked at Caleb.

“Well?” she said.

“Let’s just sit a little longer,” he said.

“It’s warm in there,” she said. “Let’s go if just for that.”

“You’re right,” he said.

She watched him for a while, her eyes narrowing, then she looked at something over his head, then down one side of the street, then the other. She looked at her arm as if she could see the watch through the layers of clothes.

“Caleb,” she said.

“In a minute,” he said. He tried not to look at her, tried to think about the building. A giant onion, or a beet, or a carrot half out of the ground. He’d heard about it from his father, his mother. The floor spiraled up and up so that you were always on a slope, so that the paintings, hanging horizontal, seemed always a little off. A joke, his father had said. Frank Lloyd Wright did not intend to let you forget for one minute you were in one of his buildings.

“Caleb,” Michelle said.

Caleb exhaled. The steam floated in front of his face for a second before melting into the air. “Let’s not go,” he said. “I don’t think I want to go. I want to be able to say that I lived in New York without going to the tourist traps.”

Michelle slapped at her jacket. A cab cruised by at a good pace, tossing gray slushy snow onto the curb in front of them. Specks hit Caleb’s boots. He looked at them. Tiny galaxies. Michelle’s jacket was made of wool, scratchy looking. A dark green, fastened with a wide belt, shiny black buttons. She looked stylish, and home made. Beautiful.

“Are you planning on leaving soon?” she said. “Is that what you mean?”

“That’s not what I mean,” he said.

“Well,” she said. “That’s what it sounds like.” She walked to the curb, stepped into the street, turned back to him. “I’m going to the museum. You can join me if you want.” She waited a moment, then crossed the street and stepped carefully on the stairs on her way to the door.

I’d really like to see that museum, Caleb thought. I really would. Really.

He waited until his legs were numb, stood, slapped at them, crossed the street. He leaned back, stared at the giant carrot. How far up had Michelle gone? He turned away, headed back downtown, looking for a subway entrance.

CALEB SHIVERED IN front of the newspaper stand on his way to work. It was early morning, and though the late winter sun was out and brighter than it had been in weeks, it was still cold in the shadows where the old man sat in his wooden stand, hands in gloves with the thumb and index fingers cut out.

“All the mornings I see you go by here,” the old man said. “Never a word. Not even a peep. Now you stop, and you don’t buy.”

“I’m sorry,” Caleb said.

The old man watched him for a few minutes, his glasses reflecting the bright sky when he turned his head to scout, Caleb assumed, for likely customers just ahead. The streets were empty.

“One of those mornings,” the man said, gesturing at the sky and shaking his head. He pulled a magazine from beneath his flimsy counter and proceeded to read, his eyes glancing above his glasses when reading the top of the page, through them as he moved to the bottom. Caleb stood as still as possible, bringing his hands out of his pockets once in a while to blow on them, then rub them together.

“What is it?” the man said. “Are you wanting to steal something? Wanting something maybe you should be embarrassed to ask for?”

“No,” Caleb said. “I’m late for work.”

“Then get on with you! Go!”

“I can’t,” Caleb said. And he couldn’t. He’d been late when he got up in the morning, had skipped the toast, had skipped his morning ritual of examining the curtains of his neighbors across the courtyard, had lain in bed, in fact, staring at the ceiling and counting the beeps of his alarm clock. He’d reached eight hundred and sixty-nine before he got up. He took a shower, dressed and headed out the door, thinking of excuses, or best of all, of avoiding anyone who might ask him why he was late. Michelle was working today. Michelle was now his boss. She would have to ask. He would have to answer. She would have to warn him, remind him there were plenty of people needing jobs. He would have to make reassuring noises. She would have to reassure back. And behind it all, he would see worry in her eyes. He would see in her eyes her own sense that he was worrying about her. When he looked up, he was at the corner of the newsstand festooned with *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*. Senators and lawyers and actors glaring into the street.

“Young people today,” the old man said.

“It’s not that,” Caleb said. “I’m always on time. Or I used to be. It’s just that lately....”

The old man took off his glasses and polished the lenses between his pinky and middle fingers, which still had cloth covering them.

“Well?” he said. “Let’s hear it.”

“Lately,” Caleb said, “I’ve become, well, absent-minded.”

“Ah,” the old man said. “I see.”

“What do you see?” Caleb said.

“Are you married, young man?” the old man said. “Girlfriend? Children?”

“Girlfriend,” Caleb said. “Why?”

“Do you read the newspapers?” the old man said.

“No,” Caleb said. “Not at all, in fact. Has something happened?”

“I prescribe a dose of news,” the old man said. “What you need is a little anger.

A little something to get you up in the morning.”

“I don’t know,” Caleb said. “I doubt that would work. I think I would just be uninterested. I’d open it up and see only the spaces between the columns.”

“You’ve got it bad,” the old man said.

“Got what?”

The old man shrugged. “You think I would know? Me? I sit out here day after day. You think if I knew something I wouldn’t be where I had to take the elevator?”

“I feel like everything is sliding out of my brain,” Caleb said. “Like something inside of me is making room for something else.”

“You expecting a fiery chariot or something? Someone to come down and tell you what to do? What, the voice of God is what you want?”

From the direction of his apartment building several men with briefcases, and a woman with a flowery shoulder bag started toward him. “Yes,” Caleb said. “Maybe that’s exactly what I want.”

ONE MORNING HE looked at himself in the mirror. He had grown thinner. His whisker shadow, what there was of it, had grown tougher, darker against his pale skin. The darkness filled the hollows he'd never before had in his cheeks. The cartilage in his nose stood out more than it had, or he noticed it more—he couldn't tell which. He could see the horseshoe shape of his jaw when he lifted his head. The nubs at the top of his chest, the notches in his collar bone stuck out, flared prominently backward and over his shoulders. He was becoming Mr. Thin. He did not understand it. He ate food. He drank lots of Coke. He often walked to work.

Under his eyes, dark shadows, fish-scale in shade, a dark, steely blue, a touch of green, like faded bruises. It's as if I've been through something, he thought. But I haven't been through anything.

ON THE FIRST day of spring, Michelle touched Caleb on the shoulder, snapping him out of himself and back into her apartment. Earlier, he had opened the window, sat down on the blue love seat and felt the air move over his head, tugging at it. The smell, clear and cool, had reminded him of the air around Mt. Hood, in Oregon, and the clean, steady light filtered by the half-open curtains reminded him of the blue-gray ceiling of his bedroom at his parents' house. When Michelle tapped him on his shoulder, he wondered where she had come from, what her name was.

"Where've you been?" she said. "I've been watching you for an hour."

"You must be bored," he said.

"Don't change the subject," she said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “The air felt good. Smells like Oregon.”

She sniffed like a small animal in tall grass. “A wet street,” she said. “Wet dust.”

“To you,” he said. He got up, started making a grilled cheese sandwich. Michelle followed him into the kitchen.

“It’s like you disappear,” she said. “It’s like who you are—the man I know—you just take off, like a coat. And when you’re naked in that way, nothing’s there.”

“Thanks.”

“You know what I mean.”

The skillet was heavy, made of blackened iron. He moved it around on the stove, listened to the bottom scratch against the burner, felt the vibrations like nails against a chalkboard. The cooking butter smelled great. He felt himself slipping into the flatness again, but Michelle was right there, staring, holding him back. He remembered the feeling from before, in the last year of college, but he’d never flattened out, not in this same way, unaware of passing time, of other people reading novels on the couch, or watching him from the chair by the desk. This was a new development. He loved Michelle and didn’t want to give her up, didn’t want to leave her like he had left college, left his family. And he didn’t want to tell her this because he was convinced she would take him too seriously, fold his every move and habit into convincing herself he was going to leave, and once both of them were convinced, what else could follow?

“Something I’ve always had,” he said. “Since I was a kid.” He cleared his throat, turned down the burner and scooped the grilled cheese onto a plate. “I like to think of it

as a sort of recharging moment, you know, when all the past is catching up and resettling, all the chains of logic and reason and events adjusting to more recent events.”

Michelle took a bite out of the grilled cheese, which Caleb hadn’t touched, and watched him, her forehead furrowed in the way she had when she was reading small print, or trying to memorize a keyboard sequence for the computer at work.

“You of all people,” Caleb said, “should know about that sort of thing, given what happened and all.”

“I’m not the one flattening out,” she said, naming the condition for the first time aloud. “If my past had to be dealt with in that way, how come I’m not doing that?” Before Caleb could answer, she continued. “What happened to you? What was so shocking and horrific that your identity shifts on and off like that? Huh?”

He imagined possible explanations. He was a snake shedding skin, mental skin. Or a larva shedding its cocoon. Getting ready to grow into something new, something larger. How could he say these things? Wouldn’t she assume that she was part of the skin, the cocoon, destined to be discarded, dispersed in a puff of wind? The curtains ballooned, blowing air down the back of his bare neck. He felt himself beginning to drift again, shivered, shook his head, stared at the part in Michelle’s hair and thought about the four years missing in her life. “Those four years,” he said. “If anyone around here has flattened out, it’s you. Or *was* you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe you.” She was about to say something, but then noticed she was still eating his sandwich one small bite at a time, was more than half

way done with it. She held it up in her thin fingers beside her head as she looked searchingly at him. She dropped the sandwich on its saucer, and started to laugh.

He laughed with her, glad of the distraction.

“I don’t know,” Caleb said. “I don’t know why I do that. Does there have to be a reason?”

“No,” she said. “No reason at all. I guess there could be worse things.”

Like what? Caleb wanted to ask her. Instead, he went into the bathroom to wash the butter off his hands.

But it had happened a few more times since the spring. Caleb often found himself jolted by her touch, by her stare, her look telling him of an hour gone in what seemed to him a minute of time.

ONE MORNING, IN late spring, Caleb didn’t get out of bed. He woke up just before noon, the alarm still faintly pulsing, a buzzing beeping sound he normally couldn’t stand. On this particular morning, he didn’t mind it. Barely heard it. His room was at one end of the apartment and had no windows. Light streamed in from the next room, which wasn’t really a room, but a small dining area between what he used for a bedroom and the tiny door leading to a closet-sized kitchen. He’d speculated, when he’d first moved in, that the apartment had been sectioned off from something much larger. More people, more profit. The walls were yellow. The ceiling white and water-stained, the shades of brown and gray like a topographical map. He pushed himself back on his pillow, pulled his blanket up to his neck and rested his arms on top. The alarm clock continued to beep, the

soft buzzing beneath it reminding Caleb of a nest under chirping birds. Faintly, water dropped from the kitchen faucet into the stainless steel sink. Thpp. Thpp. Thpp.

The phone rang, purring softly just under his bed. He thought about reaching under, answering, but then thought that maybe it wasn't such a good idea. Someone from work, no doubt. Maybe Michelle. Maybe Rachel. Maybe a wrong number. They would ask about the number they had called. About classes. Tell him it was time to quit being self-indulgent and come back to work.

After a while, the phone stopped ringing.

He thought about pulling the line out of the wall, but instead, stayed in bed. The radiator kicked on, adding its hammer blows to the alarm, settling finally into a soft hiss. The room was warm. He leaned to his right and stared at the plant on the window sill above the radiator. It was completely dead, its long, broad leaves like spiders' legs, like oil derricks rusted and unmoving on a yellow prairie.

I should water them, he thought. There's nothing left to keep them alive. Nothing there under the surface. A little water. A modicum. A quotient. It was the least he could do. The dripping faucet was an invitation. Just get up, get a glass out of the cupboard, and water the plant. Maybe there was something down there, in the roots, ready to grow again. Maybe a stray seed. Maybe both. The light began to change, making the rooms more yellow. He turned on his side, then on his stomach.

HEAT ROSE IN waves up the courtyard, billowing twelve stories, he imagined, from some crack in the Earth. It wouldn't surprise him if he lived an elevator ride above the

entrance to the underworld. The only time the bottom of the courtyard ever saw sun was during a certain few weeks during the summer when the sun managed to be directly overhead. A perfect place for an entrance.

He stared out the window at his neighbors, staring out their windows, at him, at the sky, at people to the left and right of him. It was the first hot day of the year and the Super had not been around yet to turn on their air conditioners. Many of the people across the courtyard wore wet hand towels on their heads, waved cardboard at their faces. The whole side of the building looked like a rock cliff on the Pacific coast, Peru, perhaps, or Chile, the nesting place of the great Albatross.

“Caleb,” Michelle said. “Have you been listening to me?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Well?” she said.

“I guess it really doesn’t matter,” he said.

“*That’s* obvious,” she said.

She was pulling the dead plant from the pot, spilling the dirt on some newspaper she had brought with her. They had had words. She berated him for not eating. Was he anorexic? She told him it was not a good thing to force her to fire him. She had made excuses. She had lied. But then she had had to face facts. Was this something he had intended to put her through, or was he just stupid?

“Neither,” he had said. “Or maybe both.”

She scooped a plant out of its plastic pot and held it gently inside the orange ceramic pot she had brought over.

“I should break up with you,” she said. “No woman should have to put up with this.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Is this what you want?” she said. “Is this your way of getting rid of me?”

It was not, Caleb thought. He did not want to get rid of her. He hadn’t wanted to lose his job. But every morning, when his alarm rang, he’d get up, turn it off, glance out the window, then get back into bed. A few more minutes, he would tell himself. Hours later he’d wake up with a start, imagine he’d had a dream about a class he was supposed to be in all semester but had forgotten until finals week. Then he’d remember that he’d missed another day of work, leap up, desperate to change things. Sometimes he made it out doors. He’d talk to the old man at the newspaper stand. Drink tea with him in little glass jars, with extra lemon. Sometimes he’d walk as far as the Barnes and Noble parking lot, stand near the main road, leaning against a sapling, or a light pole, and stare at the customers. Sometimes he saw a flash of red hair.

He’d tried explaining it to Michelle over the phone, before he stopped answering it. “I go through these stages,” he said. “I’ll pull out of it. I’m sure I will.”

“What will it take this time?” she’d said. “Chicago? Europe?”

“Krakow,” he’d said.

She didn’t think he was funny. He didn’t think he was funny.

What it all came down to was that he didn’t want to do anything, or anything in particular. He’d start reading a novel, then put it down. He’d set out for the subway,

intent on visiting Central Park, or the Museum of Modern Art, and end up in a comic book store five blocks in the opposite direction.

Michelle scooped in extra soil around the new plant, and from the kitchen, where she went to get some water, she said, “Why don’t you use your mother’s credit card to get some help. Medical help. Psychiatric help.”

“Maybe I should,” he said.

Michelle dripped water around the plant’s new dirt, packed it down, poured a little more. Water spilled out of the dish beneath the pot, wetting a circle on the newspaper. “Then again,” she said. “If you had that much gumption, you wouldn’t need to make an appointment.”

“Catch 22,” he said.

She set the plant on the sill. “I know you’re going to let this die,” she said. “But maybe if you just concentrate on keeping this one thing alive, you’ll make it.”

“So what happened to you?” he said. “Back then. You know, when you were eight.”

“I don’t know, Caleb,” she said. “And don’t distract me. I don’t buy it anymore. I don’t know what’s up with you. I think I’m going to leave, and I don’t think I’ll be coming back. I won’t call, not that you’d answer.” She paused, waiting for him to say something, argue, make reassuring noises. He watched a little kid with a stack of computer paper fold an airplane and send it out the window, then fold a new one, send it out as well. When he turned to see what Michelle was doing, she was gone.

And that was that. He didn't water the plant. He bought food at the store when he was almost too weak to walk out of the apartment building. He paid his bills by calling up the companies and using his mother's credit cards. Every Sunday, the phone rang for an hour at seven and another hour at nine. He wouldn't answer. His mother, perhaps. Or Rachel.

SUNDAY EVENING. CALEB hadn't gotten out of bed all day, had dozed, sitting up, after watching his apartment fill with light. When he awoke, in late afternoon, he could hear the singing. The woman next door. He hadn't heard the baby cry for what seemed weeks, since the heat wave broke, anyway. Still, she sang those low, moaning melodies, those words sounding like, "bone," "alone," "drone," "home." She kept on singing as the sunlight faded, as his yellow room, turned blue, then gray. He was glad Michelle wasn't there. She wouldn't have liked it.

The plant at the window had not yet died. He hadn't watered it. Perhaps weeks had not passed since he had last seen Michelle. It seemed like weeks. Or maybe she had done something to the plant. Maybe it was plastic. The thought of this almost got him out of bed. Plastic, he thought. Well preserved.

When it was dark, he stared at his clock's red numbers and tried to will himself into action. The woman still sang, more quietly, now, as if her battery were running out. Her voice gave him energy. Made him feel as if he were gearing up for something. Still, he could think of no reason to get out of bed. He wasn't even hungry. He didn't have to go to the bathroom. He wasn't cold or hot. He wasn't thirsty.

He thought about Michelle. He thought about walking into Barnes and Noble, seeing her at the cash registers, or talking to his replacement, telling him how to rearrange books in such a way as to not confuse customers. Telling him which books were to be stacked covers out, which to be stacked bindings out. Then she'd see him. Then she'd look away. Then he'd wander around the store, unable to read, unable to see what he was looking at, waiting to catch a glimpse of her hair.

He missed her. He made a list of what it meant, now that she was gone.

No more sex.

No more hanging out at her house.

He would miss her wide front window, with the sheer curtains, the home made curtain rod, the trees just outside, leaves rustling in the fall and spring.

He would miss the smell of the rain on the streets.

The white gloppy patch above the front door where the landlord had fixed the leak.

The way she turned the pages of books, as loudly as possible, as if announcing to the world that she had accomplished one more page in the millions she had yet to go.

The way her legs twitched when she fell asleep.

The strands of red hair in the comb on her bathroom counter.

The way, when she was frustrated at him, she said, "Caleb," her chin tucked in, her eyes turned up at him. The way she made him feel like a kid at those moments, a dork, a fool, helplessly out of touch.

They would not have children together. He would never see her in a Laundromat, beautiful and exhausted, a mountain of sheets and diapers. He would never see her in middle age, see her younger self through the shortened gray hair, the lines around her eyes and mouth, the wattled neck.

He would never again worry about her. What had happened to her when she was eight? Why didn't she remember? Why didn't she want to remember? He would, eventually, stop thinking about what was missing in her, what it was that made her who she was, a woman who seemed to go about her life without expectations, without desperation. Did she stare at parking lots because she had been kidnapped from one, or because parking lots were the only thing to stare at in New York? He would miss these thoughts.

And then the phone rang.

He thought, No, maybe in the end, I won't miss the worrying. If the worrying went away, I wouldn't miss it at all.

The phone rang again.

Something seemed to work loose in his mind, in his chest, in his legs. A tension he hadn't known was there.

The woman stopped singing.

When the phone rang for a third time, he picked it up.

"Hello?" he said.

"Caleb?" his mother said.

MICHELLE SAT CROSS-LEGGED on his freshly laundered and tucked in bed. “I couldn’t help it,” she said. “I didn’t want to give up. I mean, it’s so stupid. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Caleb said. He was in the tiny kitchen, scooping loose-leafed tea into tiny glasses. He’d just turned down the kettle but the water still bubbled throwing steam into the air. “I’m glad you came back.”

“Not that it would have killed you to call me,” Michelle said.

“Do you like lemon?” Caleb said.

“No.”

Caleb poured the water into the glasses and watched the leaves swirl and leak color. They reminded him of thoughts in a brain, flying around at random until finally settling down into a pattern predicting the future. He squeezed a slice of lemon into his glass, dropped in the rind, added the slice he had cut for Michelle. Gingerly, fingers on the lips of the glass, he brought her the tea, joined her on the bed.

“You’ve got something against tea cups?” she said.

“It’s the way that old man down at the newspaper stand drinks it,” he said. “I like it. Cool.”

“Hot,” she said.

“You’ve got to hold it on the lip,” he said. “That’s where the heat dissipates. And then you have to sip it like this.” He put his lips to the edge of the glass and sucked a tiny layer of water off the surface.

“Gross,” she said.

“Suit yourself,” he said.

He told her about the phone call from his mother, that his oldest sister was getting married, but he didn't tell her Raymond, his oldest brother, was the real reason he was going. He'd wanted to tell her because he felt that Raymond was the most important thing in his life, or had been. He set down his tea, stood up, paced back and forth, then sat back down. He couldn't tell her about Raymond. He was too scared. He had no idea why he was scared, he just was. If he told her about Raymond, something bad would happen. She'd look at him as if she knew something he didn't. Instead, he told her about how his sister had been a lesbian.

"I'm going to fly out there next week," he said. "Just for a little while. For the wedding. It'll be good to see all those people."

"I think it's a good idea," she said. "Maybe you need something like that."

"And then I'll come back and get a job."

"In all this," she said, her arm sweeping around. "Did you figure out what you wanted to do? What kind of job you wanted?"

"No," he said. "Should I have?"

"You need a focus," she said. "That's your problem. Something that makes you forget all the routine."

"Really?" he said.

"Really," she said.

"Go with me," he said. "Portland is a great city. Totally different than New York. It's like a village, really. Doesn't know it's a city, yet."

"I can't," she said. "Work."

“Oh,” he said.

“In a year, I’ll be able to take time off, you know.”

“I see,” he said. “Why not quit, then, and come with me?”

“No,” she said. She sipped at the tea, then jolted the glass away from her face, spilling a little on his bed. “No, really, I think this is something you need to do for yourself.”

“You’re testing me,” he said. “You’re fitting me into something I don’t know anything about.”

“No I’m not,” she said. “I don’t play games.”

“That’s true,” he said.

Later, Michelle stood at the window, staring as if there were a parking lot twelve floors up. “I’ll look after your apartment,” she said. “Maybe I’ll clean the dump up.”

“I just cleaned it.”

She ran her finger along the window sill. “You did,” she said. “Weeks of doing nothing, and then you dust?”

“I was in the mood.”

She stuck her finger in the plant’s soil. “And you watered,” she said.

“I knew I forgot something,” he said. He went into the kitchen, poured a glass of tap water.

“No, really,” she said, showing him her muddy finger. “You don’t need to!”

“I swear,” he said. “I never watered it. I haven’t touched the thing since you were here, that first day of the heat wave.”

“Come on,” she said. “You expect me to believe the plant watered itself?”

He closed his eyes, tried to assemble the weeks in his mind. He had gotten out of bed to use the bathroom, to buy things at the store. Could he have watered it without thinking? He decided it was a miracle regardless of possible explanations.

He opened his eyes when Michelle hugged him. Her hair smelled like her bathroom, a soft chemical sweetness. He loved that smell. Loved her arms around him, tight, containing, as if pressure was the only thing he needed to keep himself together.

“That’s nice,” he said.

“You were right,” she said. “You said you’d pull out of it.”

He looked at the blank curtains across the courtyard, then imagined himself in front of a grocery store, an old fashioned one fronted by a giant arch. He held a Coke bottle in each hand, the glass cold against his palms. Pulling out of the parking lot—an old dark blue car, light blue seats, and a little girl with red hair peaking out the back, waving to him.

He closed his eyes. “Come with me,” he said.

CALEB COMPLAINED ABOUT the people. “They walk too slow,” he said. “Don’t they know where they’re going? This is New York. Why so slow?” Old men and women in long dark coats, tiny children, people in wheelchairs, businessmen in gray suits, shiny brass fittings on their briefcases milled around the airport aimlessly, as if they had unwittingly ended up in limbo. “Abandon all hope,” he said.

“Relax,” Rachel said. “You’re not afraid of flying, are you?”

“Afraid of not flying,” Caleb said. “That’s more what it’s like.”

“Silly,” Rachel said.

They wove in and out of crowds until they found the right gate. The plane’s nose was snug against the entrance ramp, but no one was going in or out. After checking in, they sat down after checking in to wait.

“These chairs bug me,” Caleb said. “Look at the way they’re all hooked together. Some idiot five seats down fidgeting and we have to deal with it.”

Michelle pulled her flannel shirt tighter. “I’m cold. Is this place cold?”

“A little,” Caleb said. “I can’t believe they have fast food in these places now. Don’t they know how much old fries stink?”

“Okay,” Michelle said. “Okay, that’s enough.”

They waited.

“It’ll be interesting,” he said, pointing at the plane. “I suddenly miss that place, Portland.” He couldn’t help himself and told her about his oldest brother Raymond, missing these last ten years. “He had big ears,” he said. “Kind of a dopey expression.” He told her that his life was filled with holes, like her missing years, only different. There wasn’t anything he couldn’t remember. Nothing had really happened. But always there were times when he just seemed to drop out.

“Manic depression,” Michelle said listlessly.

“Maybe,” Caleb said. “Probably not. Nothing that convenient.” Maybe, he told her, if he could hook up with Raymond again, these things would be cleared up. Just the mention of his name had been enough to pull him out this time. He had said these things

thinking they would cheer Michelle up. Positive statements about achieving things, moving forward.

She wasn't cheered up.

The sky outside was bright blue and most of the people around them, the ones not in suits (Caleb had not seen so many suits before coming to New York), wore short sleeves and propped sunglasses on their heads. It was going to be a long flight. First to Chicago. Then to Dallas. Finally to Portland, the most direct route (and the most expensive) he could find on short notice. He'd used his mother's credit card.

"I paid two months on the apartment," he said. Michelle, distracted, distant, stared out onto the runway, where men in jump suits drove baggage trains and poked at the landing gear. Had this been what he had seemed like to her the past few months? Horrible. She had stuck with him though. He was lucky.

"Just in case," he said.

"In case of what?" she said.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I'll want to stay a little longer. You never know."

"Do you think that's a possibility?"

"No," he said. He kissed her on the cheek, but she didn't move, didn't look at him.

"I have a bad feeling about this," she said. "Something's not right."

"Flying is the safest way to travel," he said. "Clear skies all across the country."

"That's not what I mean," she said. "I think you're not coming back."

“I am,” he said. “There’s nothing could keep me away from you.”

“Why did you tell me to quit my job?”

“What?”

“Why do you want me to come with you? Quit and come with you? It’s because you’re not coming back.”

“False,” Caleb said. “Absolutely false. I love you.”

She finally looked at him, her eyes worried. She didn’t believe him.

“What’s the matter with you all of a sudden?” he said.

She looked away. “I don’t know,” she said. “I just have this feeling.”

They hugged for a long time before he got on the plane. He kissed Michelle on each eye and told her to keep those books in line. He would call her every day. He’d let her know what the scoop was in Portland, Oregon.

He had a window seat on the plane. The passenger next to him was a very old man, with a long white beard hanging off his chin, a snow white, overgrown goatee. Huge bags hung around his eyes, which were closed the moment he sat down. The man’s clothes were old-fashioned, somehow, though Caleb couldn’t figure out in what way. His canvas shirt seemed too thick, as if actually made of canvas. And his shoes had stitching on the outside. His claw-like wrinkled hand clutched the divider between them, its slight tremor the only sign of life.

A regular Mr. Thin, Caleb thought.

As the plane pulled away from the ramp, Caleb found Michelle standing behind the terminal window, her whole body, facing him, one hand in her pocket, the other touching the glass. She was staring at him, now. At him.

CHAPTER 3

RAYMOND:

A VAULTED ceiling. A giant rectangular window filled with blue and white and green, a mountain, trees on both sides like outdoor curtains. A hard wood floor bright with glare. Shifting circles. His mother's warm hand around his. Pajama legs with slick-soled feet sewn onto the bottoms. He couldn't walk without her. His feet slid like rubbing hands.

They walked together, in a circle. He couldn't feel her warm hand after a while, their touch perfectly matched. The blue window light, then the yellow kitchen light, the dark bookshelves, the blue light again, the stairway, his hand warm, not too warm.

His mother stood in the kitchen's yellow light, her arms crossed around a tall glass of ice water. He took a few more steps. His slippered feet slapped on the slick floor. He was confused. Something wasn't right. He was walking without her. Had been. Hadn't known. He tumbled, his feet scrambling to catch his chest. They might have made it but he had thrown his arms out to catch something, anything.

All of it in a split second.

The puzzle. Something wasn't right. He'd forgotten something. Fear. His muscles worked, his heart, steady, his mind, clouded, confused. The blue and yellow light spun around him. He didn't want to learn to walk. He didn't want to be tricked into it. He didn't want his mother to let go of his hand.

He expected to hit the ground, feel a sharp pain on his knees, his elbows, a sickening thud on his head. He knew he was going to hit his head because he had given up. There was nothing else to do but to give up. His mother stood in the yellow light, her arms crossed.

He didn't hit the floor. The confusion continued, the swirling light, the floor, the ceiling, the floor, the ceiling, and then the whiskers on his cheek. A low grumbling, rumbling sound through his chest. A good sound. Sympathy. Knowledge. Wisdom.

"You're in a new world," the voice said. Seemed to say. He couldn't understand words, then, or not many of them. But the feeling of the words: A new world. Don't worry about the old. I'm here now. I'll take care of you. I'll watch out for you.

And there was some laughter in it all. And the sound of his mother's voice.

"You're on your own, now," the whiskers said. "On your own." He believed the voice, trusted it, but he could still hear his mother's laughter. He was scared.

That was Caleb's earliest memory. *That* was Raymond.

ONE NIGHT, CALEB, age eight, watched television, flipped through the channels at random the way he'd seen his father watch dozens of shows at once. He stopped on a documentary about the ocean. The television room, recently moved to the basement, was dark except for the blue-white light playing over the pool table, the walls, the couch where he lay, the seven paintings above his head. Very little narration. Atmospheric music, rolling violins, bubbling harps, the picture a slow weave through coral, frilly,

spindly animal-plants, oscillating jelly fish and tiny white particles floating everywhere, measuring everything.

Half asleep he imagined the neighborhood, all of Portland underwater, the same bright blue water, the blurry columns of light, the particles and the water-breeze swaying everything at the same pace in the same direction. He floated down the stairs to dinner, swam to school over houses, saying hello to Noah who worked near the top of a skyscraper, holding on to a radio tower, his body gently waving, like a flag, like all the other people hanging from window sills and flag poles, all pushed and pulled at the same time, in the same direction.

The next day, his mother gave him a dollar and a warning and he headed for the local high school to swim in the pool. The water was bright and though he had told his mother that a Raymond had taught him, he didn't know how to swim. There were two pools, a deep, twelve-foot diving pool, a shallow racing pool with stripes. Both crowded. The teenager who took his money told him he could use one of the lockers if he had a padlock. He didn't, but went to the locker room to check anyway. He liked the odd smell. Detergent and steam. Somewhere, behind rows and rows of dark green lockers, a shower sprayed rough cement. Somewhere else, a locker door slammed shut, the metal rattling, the sharp sound deadening in the empty air. He opened the first locker he came to, felt around the shelves, fingered the latch into which he could insert a padlock, if he had one. He took off his pants, his shirt, his shoes, thought about it awhile, then left the locker room and set his things on the cement near the pool. Other people had done these things, too, only they had towels. Caleb had forgotten his. For a moment, a brief

moment, he thought that maybe he should go home, that he wasn't ready for this, that he couldn't be expected to learn to swim without a towel.

He slipped into the pool and gripped the side until his hands ached. Hand over hand, he pulled himself to the corner and waited. The water smacked against the gutters: "balk," "plish." The chlorine filled his nostrils. He liked the smell. Salty.

A teenager, a woman in a pink bikini, her green-blond hair hanging in strands over her peeling nose, leaned toward him, asked if he were okay, if he knew how to swim.

"Yes," he said. "My older brother taught me." There were younger kids than he in the pool, dog paddling, splashing, riding on their brothers' shoulders.

"I'm going to keep my eye on you," she said.

"You don't need to," he said.

"Well," she said. "You be careful."

He held his breath, ducked under the water, came back up. He tried this several times. The water grew more and more crowded, teenagers swimming and splashing all over, women holding babies, men with water dripping from clotted moustaches. He had never seen any of these people. He could barely understand what they were saying. All the shouting. All the echoes. The plish and balp in his ears.

He worried about his eyes, thinking they would burn under the surface like they did with soapy bathtub water. He wanted to see, though. He took a large breath, plugged his nose, held on with his other hand, dipped below the surface and opened them.

Too blurry, like he needed glasses, not at all like television. Muted noise. A body crashed into the water a few feet away, almost no sound. Torsos, arms, legs, skirts and the edges of shorts floating, rippling, all in the same direction at the same time, and the watery light, pale blue and white, the surface a giant rectangle above.

Later, he tried dog paddling. He watched the other little kids, listened to a giant fat woman try to teach her daughter, who wasn't getting it. Caleb pushed out from the side and thrashed like hell toward the other wall of the corner—about three feet away. He made it. He paddled as fast as he could, and he made it. He wanted to tell someone, but there was no one to tell. He wanted to tell the fat woman, but she didn't seem to notice his courage. Would only say, after all, "That's nice." He wanted to brag to the little girl. She looked too sad, too desperate. Maybe she had wanted to go swimming that morning, but now she wanted to be home in her sunlit bedroom playing with blocks. He felt sorry for her. He could dog paddle. She couldn't.

He watched the older boys jump off the sides in a competition to create the largest splash. Some of them backed up to the locker room to get a running start. The girl in the bikini threatened them, said "no running," said she'd throw them out if they kept it up. She had a whistle around her neck. She had a loud voice.

Caleb ducked under again and saw a man swimming near the bottom, his arms sweeping ahead of him, his hair like one of the jelly fish he'd seen the night before. Caleb wanted to swim like that. He wanted to be the man swimming alone, untouched, beneath the others.

He pulled himself out of the water and before he could think twice, jumped into a clear patch three feet out. He let go of his nose once he was under. He thrashed around like he was dog paddling, his legs and arms kicking at random. He managed to turn around. He could see the wall ahead of him, the edge of the pool broken by the surface of the water, but he couldn't move up, couldn't move forward no matter how hard he tried.

This was the end, he thought. This was it. He thought of the distant splash of the shower. He thought about the bikini girl on the other side of the pool, yelling, whistling. He thought about the little girl's tired, desperate expression, the water splashing in her face. This was it.

For no reason he could figure out afterward, he quit kicking, quit struggling, for a moment, floated, felt as peaceful as he'd ever felt, then he swept his arms forward and back, kept his legs still, and he was at the pool's side, gasping for air, glad for the chlorine sting in his eyes.

Later, he waited by his pile of clothes, shivering because he had no towel. A cloud had covered the sun and he was tired. He knew even then that he'd never tell anyone, not even Raymond, what had happened, that in order to get to the side of the pool, he'd had to give up.

A MOBILE, ABSTRACT wire and string, hung near the closet door. The story was that Raymond had made it the day Caleb was born, had hung it from the ceiling the moment Caleb emerged quiet, mouthing syllables, into the world. Since he could remember,

Caleb had woken up in the middle of the night, every night, to see that mobile spinning there. This time he did not have to go to the bathroom. He did not feel restless, or nervous. This time he was relaxed. Even in the middle of the night, with the curtains closed and all around him, a dark gray kind of blue. The mobile twisted counterclockwise, then clockwise, back and forth, measuring the passage of time, the sigh of central air.

Caleb had just turned nine the day before. Raymond had appeared unexpectedly, joined Caleb's birthday party, just the family, cake and ice cream after dinner, some new clothes, a lamp, and from Raymond, a statue of an antelope with two long horns. Raymond wouldn't say where he had been living. Alaska, Caleb guessed, because of his giant parka. They'd had hot dogs for dinner.

Relaxed.

Caleb stepped out of bed, put on his pajamas, stepped into the hallway. All the doors were closed except for Raymond's, lit by the blue numbers of the "guest bedroom" clock, and the door to the attic stairs. Caleb touched the wall, walked to the stairs, climbed. Not a single creak. The stairs broke into the attic in the middle of the small area in front of his father's office. When Caleb's head poked above floor level, he saw a strip of yellow light. He waited. The room: black, except for the door—a thicker, blacker black. By day, it bristled carvings of Apostles, Christ, Mary, Roman Soldiers, the Cross. An old fashioned comic book. By night, the door was uncertain, a thick lumpy mass too cool to the touch to be alive but not to have once been alive: an elephant's skin, a whale's knobby spine.

Caleb moved closer. Touched the wood. Voices. His father's, Raymond's. Low voices, bass, subtle. He couldn't understand what they were saying, couldn't hear the words as words, only syllables: zhuh zhuh tzuh. Duh buh duh duh luh huh. Caleb pressed his chest and legs to the door, turned, let the shapes poke into his back. He wanted to go in. He wanted to know what they were saying. He wanted to hear the real words. Understand them. He wanted to be standing, with Raymond, with his father, around the yellow lamp. Darkness all around. Rows of books fading into infinity. Just the three of them standing around, talking the universe into existence.

He wanted to be invited in.

The next morning rain smashed against his window, woke him up. He couldn't remember how he had gotten back in bed. He opened the window, looked at the tiny splashes the drops made in the gutter, in the puddle in the dent on Raymond's car. He looked at the mobile, moving, for a moment, then reached up, found that, finally, he could touch it. He sent it twirling at a great rate, each wiry arm lifting as it spun.

CALEB, ONE AFTERNOON, age ten, found Raymond and Micah in the dining/family room reading from one of Micah's journals, the dark blue, squashed spiral notebooks he carried with him everywhere like other boys carried watches or pocket knives. A red pen rested above Raymond's ear, and once in a while, as Caleb watched from the couch near the back window, Raymond made a mark, handed a notebook to Micah who examined it as if it were a rare document about to disintegrate.

Micah seemed unaware that Caleb had come home.

“How’s it going?” Raymond said.

Caleb pretended to look out the window. He could see the two of them in the reflection.

“Some real promise,” Raymond said. “A rare gift, to have all those worlds in your head.”

Caleb closed his eyes. I’ve got even more in *my* head, he wanted to say. You haven’t seen *anything*. He imagined a barely perceptible smile on Micah’s face which meant that he knew how much Raymond’s focus on something other than Caleb would eat at him. Caleb worked at the lowest button in his shirt until it broke free. Kinked threads dangled like dead spider legs.

“So,” Caleb said. “When are you going to leave?”

“Soon,” Raymond said, and then sat as still as stone, moving only to turn the page of one of Micah’s notebooks. After an age, he pulled the red pencil from his ear, wet it on his tongue, wrote something. Caleb left disgusted.

He climbed to the third floor, an overgrown attic, where his father kept his office. The door, a heavy black piece of wood, was ajar. Caleb crept as close to it as he could, listening for creaks in the floor, scrapes against the carpet. None.

“Caleb?” his father said. “Is that you?”

Caleb pushed the door open, entered. His father’s arms were behind his graying head, the smile on his weathered face small and subtle. Like Micah’s.

“How did you know it was me?” Caleb said.

“You expect me to give away my secrets?”

He ran his fingers along the desk, clasped his hands behind his back, sat on the only other chair. He knew his father was watching him, but wouldn't look back. The room was large, as long as the second floor with its eight bedrooms. His father disliked light. There were several vents along the ceiling, the outside fans turning just glimpsed shadows, and there was a single desk lamp, the light yellow, above his father's desk. The room seemed to close in on itself as it receded, the shelves and rows of books like a vanishing point.

When he was younger, Caleb liked to think that he could walk to the other side of the room and never reach it, just keep walking and never get there. He still thought it might be true, at least when Raymond and his father spent all night talking with the door closed. Maybe they took little trips together. Maybe when he was older, they'd invite him along.

"Caleb?" his father said. "Are you here among the living? Walking the underworld again?"

"What?" Caleb said.

"Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

"Well," Caleb said. "Um." He shrugged, he looked around. He looked at his father, who looked back at him. The bottom half of his face was smiling, wrinkles around his mouth, a small tuft of beard at the end of his chin, a pencil thin moustache under his nose, but the top half, the half with his eyes in it, seemed to be glaring at him, a little angry, a little annoyed, a little disgusted.

But the door was open.

“Um,” he said again.

His father put his arms on the desk, lowering them slowly, like draw bridges, then quickly flicked at the hair above his ear. His ears were small, but they looked just like Raymond’s. Two satellite dishes on either side of his head.

“Nothing,” Caleb said.

What was it Raymond had written in red pencil in those notebooks? What could it possibly matter? Caleb was embarrassed. He could feel his face flushing.

“Well,” his father said. “I suppose you’ve got your secrets, too.”

Raymond didn’t leave the next day, as Caleb expected. Nor the day after that, nor the week after. He spent every afternoon with Micah, driving him to distant subdivisions and to second-hand bookstores. They came home just before dinner carrying boxes of old paperbacks, the kind with red edges, bent and curled spines, smelling like mildewed garages and wet dust. When Caleb heard Raymond’s car, he would go up to his room. He didn’t want to watch the two of them in the kitchen, or on the living room coffee table, sorting out the books, arranging them, pointing out features of the covers to each other. Caleb sat at his desk, doodling, drawing squares and circles and connecting them with long, curving lines.

It all ended on the afternoon Caleb came home to hear sawing and hammering in the basement. He wanted to hear what was up. Who would be doing such things? Workmen? Was something broken on the house? He stepped down the stairs, saw the lower half of Micah’s legs, the blue running shoes he liked to wear. Caleb went back up

to the kitchen, lay down and pressed his ear to the floor. Sawing and hammering, a few thuds, a word here or there.

After a minute or two of the sound of boards being stacked, Caleb ran up the stairs and into his room. The hammering and sawing continued in Micah's room not long after that. Caleb sat at his desk, burning with shame and anger. He tried to draw a sailing vessel, but nothing lined up right. He tried to draw a human figure. When he tried to draw a man, it turned out like a woman, and when he tried to draw a woman, it turned out like a man. He couldn't get anything right. He broke his pencil in half and sharpened both ends. Then he broke each of those in half.

Still, the hammering. Still, the sawing.

He wanted desperately to go next door, to see what they were making, but he couldn't make himself do it. His face burned. He took off his shirt to cool down. He lay down on his bed, closed his eyes. Red lights darted across his eyelids, and he felt himself sinking and spinning.

When his mother yelled that dinner was ready, he put on his shirt, stood as still as possible willing himself to feel nothing. The building had stopped. He listened for Raymond and Micah to make their way downstairs. After a moment of no sound, he opened his door.

Raymond stood next to what used to be Hannah's bedroom door, his arms crossed, an open grin on his face. "Come in and check this out," he said, nodding toward Micah's door. "I'd like to know what you think."

Caleb really wanted to take a look, to give in, to grin. He didn't. This was the first time he didn't automatically smile, laugh when Raymond looked at him that way. He wouldn't give up. He was strong.

Micah stuck his head out of his door. "Caleb," he said. "It's really cool in here now."

Not a hint of gloating. Not a hint of victory.

"Maybe later," Caleb said. He walked between them, looking straight ahead. He imagined himself one of the heads on Easter Island. His expression so frozen, so still, no one would ever know what he was thinking, what he was feeling.

The next day, before he left school for home, he found his mother and father with Rachel in front of the school's main office. They were going to have a meeting about Rachel. She had recently been tested by the counselors and was, apparently, a mathematical prodigy. Caleb could hardly believe it. She was only a little girl who liked to push blocks around the floor, arrange them in idiot piles that always fell over. It seemed to him that now there was another Rachel lurking in her brain, poking at calculators while she walked around with a dopey, slightly sour expression. When he got home, he found himself alone. Raymond's car wasn't next at the corner. Not a sound anywhere, from the basement, from upstairs. Carefully, as quietly as possible, he edged his way upstairs, step by step, listening. He stopped in front of Micah's door and pressed his ear against it. No sound.

He opened the door, went in. Beautiful. All four walls covered in shelves and books, a small area opened for Micah's bed, for his window, for his set of dresser

drawers. Row after row of paperbacks, the same size, spines in green, blue, black, red, yellow, orange, and white, nearly all the spines curved and lined. Like a library, Caleb thought, or a temple. And the smell, a pulpy, papery, dusty pressure. Caleb loved it. He wanted something like that. Wanted it badly.

Later on that night, several hours after a dinner at which he had been quiet, a sense of peace having fallen on him, something better than the numbness he had willed on himself the night before, he listened to the muted conversation between Micah and Raymond in the next room. He pressed his ear to the wall, tried to listen, but the voices were still muted. Paperback insulation.

He wanted the shelves, too, but what would he put on them? How come he wasn't obsessed with something like Micah was? He had never read a book all the way through. Even Rachel loved her blocks and could barely be dragged to dinner. Caleb wanted something like that. What was he interested in? Everything. Nothing in particular. He wasn't into books, not as interested as Micah was, as Raymond was. He wasn't interested in anything.

He hated himself for that. He pressed the pillow over his head. He hated himself because he knew it would never be any different.

Before Raymond left a few days later, he'd found Caleb alone in the afternoon, made some tea for him, rolling the leaves between his hands, pouring them into the steaming water on the stove, letting the water steep before serving Caleb a warm porcelain cup.

Just the two of them.

In the breakfast nook.

Caleb accepted the tea, said nothing to Raymond, not even goodbye. He was still angry. He was still embarrassed. Ashamed.

Raymond said nothing either. The moment meant something. With Raymond, everything meant something. Everything was a lesson. Even a cup of tea.

IN THE FALL of Caleb's sixth grade year, he came home late from school, found Raymond's backpack in the hallway. He ran upstairs to Raymond's old room, then to Micah's room. Nothing. In the attic, he eleaned against his father's door. It was locked, no light spilling beneath it. "Raymond?" he said. "Are you in there?" As silently as possible, he stepped down the stairs, said, "Boo," when he saw Raymond leaning over the kitchen sink.

Raymond didn't flinch. "Look," he said. He pointed to the outside window ledge just catching the sun's light. His nose touched the glass.

Caleb leaned over to look. "What?" he said.

"Look," Raymond said. "Open your eyes, for Christ's sake."

A tiny, single ant flicked along the chipped paint, stopping once in a while to wiggle his feelers at the open sky. Caleb glanced at Raymond, about to say, "So what?" Raymond grinned back, a huge, ear to ear, toothy grin, his eyes staring directly at Caleb's, holding them, and Caleb couldn't help but smile back, even laugh because Raymond was so silly looking, with his overlong bangs, his big ears, his dopey grin, and then Raymond laughed. For a good five minutes they laughed because they'd seen an ant

walking across the ledge. Where was it going? Was it lost? Did it know two giggling giants laughed above it?

A HOT WIND against Caleb's face, a pair of purple sunglasses his mother bought him. He was in the seat behind her, ten-year-old Rachel leaning against him, Noah and Micah also in the back seat, playing a card game. Caleb's father, as usual, silent, his wrist on the top of the steering wheel, his white beard fluttering in the wind like a field of wheat.

Raymond had invited them camping for a week at Lake Shasta.

"Why did he invite us?" Caleb said.

"Is that so strange?" his mother said.

"He never invites us to visit him," Caleb said. "He just shows up when you least expect him."

"Nerve racking," his mother said.

Caleb followed his father's glance across the back seat, saw it linger on Noah.

Micah had fallen asleep, leaning against Noah who was also asleep, his mouth open, his head pressed flat against the window, wind blowing his hair. Asleep, no doubt exhausted from the long drive, Noah seemed almost peaceful, almost one of them. If only he were asleep all the time, Caleb thought.

"Come on now, Ruth," Caleb's father said. "He's not that much of a pain, is he?"

Caleb closed his eyes.

"It's not like he bothers you," his father said.

“No,” she said. “That’s not the problem. He doesn’t talk too much, that’s for sure. It’s that he never talks to me. That’s what drives me crazy. It’s as if he recognizes my place in this family, a necessary substitute for Phyllis. I make sense to him, but I’m no different than a stack of books holding up a table missing a leg.”

Caleb’s father began to laugh. He had his arm out the window, holding on to the roof, his elbow swinging as he laughed. Ruth began to laugh, too.

“A wooden leg?” his father said. “Yee-arr yee-arr yee-arr! Shiver me timbers!”

They laughed some more, then lapsed into silence as they descended into a wide valley just over the Oregon border. Grass everywhere, a dull beige, not a speck of green. A fence line here, a building there, specks of cattle where the land swept into mountains.

Lake Shasta, Caleb thought as he relaxed his head against the window.

“Look at them,” his mother said. “So cute!”

“Hm,” his father said.

Caleb had looked up a map of Northern California. Lake Shasta lay in the middle, at the head of a giant valley, its five arms, like fingers, the lake a giant hand planted in the landscape.

They reached Raymond’s apartment in Redding in the late afternoon. Hannah and Leah were already there, having had a day’s head start on their journey taking the “scenic route” down the Oregon coast. Raymond had been working at Shasta Dam for the summer, didn’t expect to work beyond the tourist season. He had no furniture and the only food he ate were beans and rice and bottled water. His refrigerator was bare except for an empty mayonnaise jar. A beaded curtain hung over his bedroom doorway. Rachel

and Caleb loved to walk through it, feel the beads cool against their faces, imagining, at Micah's prompting, that they were transporting to other dimensions as they passed through. By that evening, they were at Lake Shasta. They'd driven a winding road to the Silverthorn resort, found a campsite on a low flat spit of land in sight of an island. They had wanted to camp on the island, but another family had beaten them to it.

While Caleb's mother, Hannah, Leah and Raymond set up the tent and the stove, their father took the younger children to some rocks just level with the water to watch the sun set. Mountains rose to the north and south, and in the east, Mt. Shasta white and pink against the dying light. Down stream, somewhere—Shasta Dam, holding it all together.

Were there towns under the water? Caleb wondered. Did people go back to them, swim down to their pick-up trucks, garages, chimneys?

The moment was quiet, only the gentle lap of wavelets and the shuffle and clink of Caleb's older sisters arranging and rearranging. His father put his arms around Caleb and ruffled his hair as he watched the sun sink into a blister. Raymond joined them, touched Caleb's knee and winked, glanced at their father who ruffled Raymond's hair as if Raymond were a kid. Raymond grinned and the two of them watched the horizon absorb the orange-yellow sliver, leaving only a distant orange wall.

The next day, and on all the days after that, Caleb floated for hours on an inflatable raft, drank cold water and ate hot dogs, tried Raymond's rice (which he didn't like), splashed around with Micah and Noah, tried to get Rachel to come out with him to float. They'd gone swimming together at the high school pool where he'd taught her to dog paddle, but the lake was too big for her and the gravel along the shoreline hurt her

feet. By evening, Caleb was dead tired, and Rachel and he were the first to go to sleep in their tent. Each night, he woke, just as he did at home, late enough to find Micah and Noah sleeping beside them, the campfire glow still washing the tent's canvas. His father and Raymond were out there talking in low, serious voices. Never a laugh. None of the up and down of argument, only pauses, and then steady resumptions. Caleb wanted more than anything to hear what they were saying. Sometimes he scooted close to the tent flap to listen, but he never understood them and couldn't keep awake.

One afternoon, on the way to the store to pick up some orange juice, Raymond and Caleb detoured to the dam. Raymond had a key. They parked on the eastern side, walked to a concrete box with an iron door which opened into an elevator. To Caleb, the dam was nothing more than concrete tunnels. The floor had gutters on either side for the running water.

"They all have leaks," Raymond said. "Something this big, you can never get it perfect."

They walked down to the end of one of the tunnels to the place where the dam gripped a rock wall. Black and chunky. Caleb worked at an outcropping until a piece loosened. He slipped it into his pocket.

"What's holding it in place?" Caleb said.

"Pressure," Raymond said. "Gravity. See how the concrete is driven into the rock?"

"Looks like it just ends."

"Maybe so," Raymond said.

Their last stop was under the dam's roadbed, above the spillway. They stepped out of an elevator, passed what looked like a control booth, and stepped onto a wire mesh cage. Between his shoes, Caleb could see a thousand feet of sweeping concrete blocks, three or four leaks. No water exploding over the spillway. Down below, to his right, water boiled from beneath a concrete bank. "They run it through turbines," Raymond said. "Those things never quit spinning."

"Spinning," Caleb said.

Directly below him, the dam met the turbulent green Sacramento, a remarkably small river, which continued its way down a steep-walled valley. To the right, a visitor's center. Along a concrete bank, a row of manhole covers. One turned, opened, and a man in an orange hat got out, replaced the cover, and headed toward the center's parking lot.

"Time to go," Raymond said.

"I can't move," Caleb said. His hands held on to the cage in front of him. He couldn't unlock them. He felt himself suspended in air. One false move and he'd plummet. He was as sure of it as he was of falling in a dream.

"I won't let you fall," Raymond said, grabbing his arm.

"I know you won't," Caleb said.

"Close your eyes," Raymond said.

Caleb did. The feeling was worse. Air passing around him, not quite a wind, not a breeze, a floating feeling. There was nothing around him but the metal at his hands, the pressure against his feet.

"Okay, now," Raymond said, "Let go."

“I can’t,” Caleb said.

“Let go the cage, and grab on to me,” Raymond said. “I’ll get you there.”

“I can’t,” Caleb said.

“Do you trust me?” Raymond said.

“Yes,” Caleb said.

“Okay, then.”

Raymond jerked Caleb’s hands free. Caleb flailed for a moment, then went limp. His eyes still closed, he allowed himself to be led into the elevator. He didn’t stop shaking until he sensed the sickening ascent. They had to walk across half the dam to get to the car and Caleb wouldn’t look down river, or toward the lake and distant Mt. Shasta rising above it. He watched the white dashes in the center of his road.

Late on the last day Caleb paddled his raft as far out from shore as possible without getting in the way of passing houseboats. Close to evening, he watched his brothers and sisters, his mother and father, pack, call to one another, call to him to get back and help and what did he think he was doing? He was on his belly. His arms propping up his head. He felt huge, as if he filled the whole lake, from the bottom, where fish snaked among ridges after worms and minnows, to the two tiny clouds in the sky’s dome trailing tendrils after the sun. His family, from that far out, was unrecognizable. Just people. Other coves, other people, other families: unrecognizable, too. He was all alone. He turned over and lay on his back and stared at the blue sky, at the clouds which looked like fish, like doors, like scissors, like a face with eye holes punched through to the blackness behind the blue. He was free, alive. He wanted to run as fast as he could,

as loosely as he could, his arms swinging. He wanted to jump off cliffs, fly through forests, scratch his back tunneling through desert sands. He wanted to move and stretch. He was shaking with the wanting.

When his father yelled that they were ready to leave, Caleb unplugged the valve of his raft, slipped into the water and swam, slowly and without splashing, toward shore. When he got there, Raymond asked why he'd left his raft on the lake. The deflated lump was a rock on the sun bright surface. Caleb had no idea, so he shrugged and ran as fast as he could along the trail, beating everyone to the parking lot.

THE PRESSURE ON his ears ached and his eyes felt as if someone were pressing on them, setting tiny jets of air to spitting out his tear ducts, but Caleb loved the dark blue, the way the water hugged him, the distant rectangle of light above, the explosions out of which bodies swam to the surface. He could count to thirty at the pool's bottom before floating up, and knowing that, he felt no anxiety, not even tension in his legs poised to shoot him toward light, heat, wind. He liked the depth, liked the pain of it, even. Something he could sustain, something he alone could or even wanted to do. Who cared about the dam? Anyone, everyone could stare off the edge of a building without fearing their own clumsiness. But this: no one was better at it than he.

Not Micah. Not Rachel. Not Raymond.

His domain.

Afterwards, he rode his bike on the way back, late afternoon, August, the one hot month in Oregon, a light breeze against his wet hair. His neighborhood was on a hill

surrounded by a larger neighborhood of smaller, older houses—yellow homes, pale blue, green, stubby bushes and weedy lawns, cars parked beneath giant, unpruned trees along the street.

Caleb rode slowly along the curb, swerving around the cars. His movements were slow, regular, graceful, as if he would have leaned and swerved whether the cars were there or not. He rode along, his body still twelve-foot-deep cool against the hot air. He closed eyes. He could sense the mass of the camper ahead of him, knew he would lean. He trusted himself. He had something. He rode steadily. His wheels chafed against his misadjusted break pads. The rusty chain on the sprocket ground along, a heavy breather.

Light kaleidoscoped, sent his body forward, then down. He had smashed into the camper, his bike dropping from beneath him, his knees, head, right wrist crashing into the bike rack before he opened his eyes. No neighbors came out of their houses. No dog galloped toward him. No friends, relatives, passersby.

He listened to his wheel spin for a moment, then tried to get up. His leg hurt. He was dizzy. His leg really hurt, stiffened even as he stood. His bike was okay. He hadn't been going fast. He had eased into the camper. Slid into it like going home.

He got back on his bike but was unable to peddle, his right leg too stiff, too painful. He tried walking, impossible. He got back on the bike, pulled the left peddle by hooking his foot beneath it, then pushed it down when it reached its zenith. He made good speed doing this. Better speed than he had been making, though his leg throbbed. For years he remembered how clever he was at riding a bike one legged.

RAYMOND, HOME FOR Christmas, told Caleb the story of Sidhartha. They were in the “new” dining room, now reachable only through the kitchen. No more couch near the back window. Snow fell in the late afternoon, but didn’t stick to the ground.

“Reminds me of Moses,” Caleb said.

“Really?” Raymond said, leaning forward. “How so?”

“All that power, just left behind,” Caleb said. “Every time I see that movie, I keep wanting Moses to stick with the Egyptians. Being a Pharaoh is a lot better than being a Prophet.”

“All that dust and disrespect,” Raymond said.

“That’s right,” Caleb said. “And Sidhartha, the same thing. I mean it’s cool to have been the Buddha, I suppose, but thankless all the same.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Caleb watched Raymond, who seemed distracted, staring at the snow. They sat on the same side of the table, drinking coffee the brewing of which had misted the corners of the windows. “Why?” Caleb said. “Why did they give those things up? Why not stick to power and *use* it. That’s what I would have done.”

“Would you?” Raymond said. His voice seemed a little angry, as if Caleb had disappointed him, or as if he had something else on his mind.

“You don’t think I would?” Caleb said.

“I’m not sure what you think of yourself,” Raymond said, “but it isn’t connected to who you truly are.”

“You think I’d head out to the desert, like Moses?”

He shrugged. Then he looked at Caleb so closely Caleb thought there might be an eyelash floating in his eyes. Then Raymond looked up, as if he had heard something.

“Rachel,” he said. “Where is she?”

They found her in the basement pushing hundreds of toothpicks around the pool table. She glanced at them, pushing her black hair out of her face to get a good look at who was watching her, and then she went back to work. Squares and triangles. Pathways. Long curves.

“A neighborhood,” Caleb said.

“A circuit diagram,” Raymond said.

“Modern art,” Caleb said.

Raymond leaned forward while Caleb sat on the stairs, looking at the paintings in the wall, seven of them. Birds. Boats. People walking along foothills. After a moment, Rachel cleared the table, sweeping it with her arm. She sighed.

Then Raymond started to talk, told Rachel she could take one toothpick, have it represent a line, and consider it the first dimension. She could take three more, make the figure into a square, and consider that the second dimension, length and width. To go from the first dimension to the second was a matter of adding a right angle to the end points of each of the tooth picks. What would she do in order to take her square into the third dimension?

“Add another right angle?” Rachel said. She pulled out a lump of clay from a little plastic box and formed a cube out of toothpicks, a ball of clay at each joint.

“What would you need to do,” Raymond said, “to take the shape into the fourth dimension?” While she tried to figure it out, adding sticks to the clay, adding more clay, tearing it apart again and starting over, Raymond left the room. Caleb watched her. She didn’t get mad. Didn’t get frustrated. She worked patiently, trying one idea, pursuing it until she could do nothing, then started over again. Raymond came back with a video camera and filmed her working with the toothpicks. She didn’t seem to notice.

“What are you doing?” Caleb asked.

“Do you think she’ll stick it out in the palace?” he said. “Or light out for the desert?”

Over the next few days, Raymond continued to watch Rachel, to make suggestions which she quickly ignored. “Tried that yesterday,” she said. At one point she came to him while he was reading next to the Christmas tree. “Okay,” she said. “I give up. What’s the trick?”

“I don’t know,” Raymond said. “You think I’d ask a question if I knew the answer?”

Caleb, who was at the coffee table trying to draw eyes, was absolutely certain that Raymond did know all the answers to the questions he asked, that the questions themselves were answers. Rachel, though, believed him. She went back to work, and Raymond kept filming her. By the end of the week, despite increased amounts of clay and toothpicks, Rachel was clearly showing signs of stress. She wouldn’t talk at dinner. She let rats grow in her hair. She never smiled. She’d taken to constructing numerous

cubes and triangles and lining them up on the table, scrunching down so that she could view the table at eye level, and circling around, as if daring the answer to jump out at her.

“What are you doing?” Caleb said, Raymond behind him holding the camera.

“Looking for something,” she said.

“What?” he said.

“An illusion,” she said.

“Oh,” Caleb said. He’d become bored by the whole thing, the toothpicks, the camera, the whole tense drama of the situation. But the fact that Rachel kept working, that interested him. Why did she do it? What did she expect? She was only ten. Then again, she had that other person in her head, the one who could do these things, think these things. He liked to watch her when he imagined this. What would the other person make her do today?

And Raymond with his camera. Caleb pestered him to know what he was doing, but Raymond said nothing, and he said nothing without even a hint at what he was feeling.

Finally, into the second week, she got an idea. Caleb wasn’t there to witness it, but saw it on the video Raymond later showed. She worked on a version of an idea she had early on. She placed a small cube in a bigger cube, and connected it into place, corner to corner. She was working on some sort of shape within shape within shape thing, in which she had these toothpick cubes, one inside another. She was holding one of these up. It might have been at night, because Raymond had strapped some sort of flashlight to the camera and you could see the spot of light wherever the camera pointed.

Rachel held one of her cubes up, put another inside, and Raymond aimed at the shape, and then you could hear Rachel say, “Look, look,” and the picture zoomed onto the shadow the two cubes made on the wall. “It’s in there,” Rachel said. “It’s in there, somewhere.” That was the end of the film.

On the night Raymond showed the raw footage, he asked Caleb and Micah and Noah and Rachel what they saw, and they said lots of things. “Seven toothpicks for seven snacks.” “A waste of time.”

“Time,” he said. “That’s right.”

Then he showed the second version of the video, captures of the cubes Rachel worked with. “It’s the fourth dimension. Time.”

A moment later, after Micah and Noah said, “Cool,” and left the room, and after Raymond gathered up his equipment to return it to the attic, Caleb sat with Rachel in the basement. She was staring at the central painting on the wall, the one that was all black except for the hint of a door, or an opening: a cave, or an ear.

“That was amazing,” Caleb said.

“Just a movie,” Rachel said. Her arms were crossed, her legs, too. She leaned against the pool table, her tongue poking around her cheek. She was ten but she looked older than any of them except, perhaps, for Raymond.

“No,” Caleb said. “I don’t mean that. I mean what you did.”

She looked at him, straight at him, into his eyes, for almost a full minute. He couldn’t look away. Her pupils were large and black, dark brown around them, her full, black eyelashes unblinking. Her eyes scared him, and her fear.

THE DAY AFTER Caleb's thirteenth birthday, he and Raymond went hiking in the Cascades. The trip began in the early morning when Caleb found Raymond in the front yard staring at Mount Hood. "Look how it floats," he said. The snow-capped peak faded to blue, then into a bank of sky blue clouds hovering over the range. "An invitation," Raymond said. "And the invitations of the universe are not to be refused." They drove all morning. Raymond's Volkswagen was hot, rattled so hard it had seemed to Caleb that at any moment they'd find the car had fallen apart some miles back. After coaxing it to several thousand feet, they found a trailhead and started hiking. For some time neither of them spoke. The cedar and oak trees loomed twice as tall as the trees in the neighborhood. Something about them, the way the bark twisted, the way the branches split, the cathedral effect of them fascinated Caleb, made him shiver as he walked along. Finally, he had to stop, dizzy from so much staring.

"I don't understand how you can believe in God," Caleb said. "Or the Universe, or whatever you call it."

He expected Raymond to say, "How can you not?" or "It's a matter of faith," but instead, he said, "Have you ever tried to imagine a tree with your eyes closed?"

"That's easy," Caleb said, having never tried it. He closed his eyes, tried to imagine the bark, the leaves, the branches, but couldn't connect them into a whole. His imagination kept switching cameras. "Yeah," Caleb said. "Yeah, I can do it."

"I thought so," Raymond said. "I think you're ready." They walked a mile further, stopped at a cliff side. Raymond pointed at a dark opening. "An old mine shaft," he said. "Not sure what they were looking for. I don't think this is gold country."

Caleb thought of an underground world, a fake sun, mountains growing toward the center of the earth, getting warmer as he climbed rather than colder, a tunnel leading with sickening gravitational effects toward the outside world.

They started in, Caleb leading. The walls: chunky, white, the ceiling just above their heads. Raymond stopped. The mine went straight back for a neighborhood block, already dark before it veered off into the blackness with a long, gentle curve. The ground crunched beneath their feet. Caleb listened to Raymond's steps until he could no longer hear them. When he glanced back, he saw Raymond matching his pace exactly.

The curve was subtle. Caleb might not have noticed it if the tunnel had been well lit. Maybe the original miners, he thought, didn't notice it either as they dug, chipped or blasted, though how could that be? Everyone noticed a change in direction, didn't they? A jittery spot of light danced ahead. Raymond had taken a flashlight out of his pack and held it wide to light the path.

"Where does this go?" Caleb said.

"To the end," Raymond said the moment before they reached the place where the miners had stopped digging, a rounded, knuckled socket, as if a giant had pressed a fist into the mountain. The rock was chunkier, triangles and squares of quartz shot through with dark threads.

"Silver?" Caleb said.

"Don't know," Raymond said.

"Have you been here before?" Caleb said.

Raymond handed Caleb a flashlight. He whipped the light beam all around, seeing if he could light the whole place at once. He couldn't. The darkness, cool and slightly damp, absorbed the light as if hungry for it. Raymond sat, his back to the unseen entrance, his hands on his knees. Caleb pushed the flashlight butt first into the loose gravel between them and sat down. The air was dark, like the inky water at the bottom of the diving pool, wouldn't let the walls reflect what poured from the flashlight. The glass over the bulb was bright, a pool of light splashed around a central shadow on the roof, but that was it, except for Raymond, who was quiet, more serious and expressionless—more spooky—than Caleb had seen him for a long time.

"I don't understand what this is," Caleb said. "A mine shaft?" His voice fell into the gravel, seemed too weak to reach even the short distance between them.

"I don't know," Raymond said. "It's a legend, you know, and it's best not to know the facts behind them."

"What legend?"

If the light went out, Caleb thought, he could find a wall, touch it, follow it like he did outside his room in the middle of the night. There was nothing to fear.

Raymond moved just at the moment Caleb wasn't looking at him, and the light went out. "Raymond!" Caleb shouted, grabbing blindly ahead of him, knocking the flashlight down. He heard it roll away. He felt the ground between them, the prickly gravel, the top of Raymond's shoe.

"Relax," Raymond said. His voice was calm, as if he were talking to himself.

"I wasn't scared," Caleb said.

“Okay,” Raymond said.

“Are you ready to go yet?” Caleb said.

“Close your eyes,” Raymond said.

Caleb closed his eyes, then jumped at the touch of Raymond’s hand on his knees.

“Cross your legs,” Raymond said, and Caleb did. Raymond pulled Caleb’s left ankle to his right knee, his right foot to his left knee. “Let me know if this hurts. You’re not as flexible as you should be.”

It hurt, but Caleb said nothing.

“How’s your back?” Raymond said.

“Numb,” Caleb said.

“Good,” Raymond said. “That’s what the lotus position does. Lets you sit for long hours to meditate.”

“Is that what we’re going to do?”

“Sh,” Raymond said. He found Caleb’s arms, folded his hands together.

“Shoulders back,” he said. “Let your hands rest in your lap.”

“Okay,” Caleb said.

“You know how you could think of a tree with your eyes closed?”

“Yes,” Caleb said.

“I want you to think of nothing.”

Caleb tried to think of nothing. He saw the man swimming along the bottom of the pool, slow and even, his hair moving forward, than backward, with every stroke. He thought of the diving pool, twelve feet down, standing there, his arms outstretched,

resting on piles of water, the dark blue all around, a little light above, the flickering diving boards, the rough cement at his feet. His stomach growled. He wanted a mustard and cheese sandwich. He pictured it. He saw the ant marching along the sill. He saw a yellow strip of light along the floor, felt an immense sadness, worse than the weight of all that water.

“It’s not working,” he said. “I’m still thinking.” He couldn’t see anything when he opened his eyes. Was this what it was like to be blind? When did you give up? How long did it take to learn to open your eyes and expect nothing? The mine shaft was silent. No noise filtered in from outside, no breathing, shuffling, nothing.

“Raymond?” Caleb said. “Are you there?”

“Breathe slowly, and not too deeply,” Raymond said. “Stare at the flashlight, or where it was. Think of a candle. Imagine it. Should be easy for you.” Caleb tried, found that it was easier than the tree, easier than “nothing.” He could see the thing in front of him, even with his eyes open. The flame moved slightly, the way it would in a still room. He could see the white wax, the translucent blue near the top, even the hint of a background, of shadows, dull orange light on walls.

“When you hear that inner conversation,” Raymond said, “concentrate on the candle, on all the details, until the voices quiet.”

Whenever the flame started to remind Caleb of something, he concentrated on the color, on the blue penumbra, and the wax, light, glowing, on the flame’s slight waver, the once-in-awhile splutter. He began to feel relaxed, strangely conscious of falling into unconsciousness, like a waking dream, though he’d never had one. Then, no matter how

hard he tried to stick with the candle, he felt something else in the room, something huge and massive approaching very slowly, not like an animal stalking, like a glacier easing down a slope, like an RV on the side of the road. He couldn't stand it, but he couldn't move, either, and he wanted to, but he was trapped. He tried to think of talking to his mother, of arguing with Rachel, anything, but nothing came, only that massive presence, bearing down. He tried to speak, but his mouth, his lungs, his lips and tongue didn't work. He struggled, and then he stopped. He let it all go, and the massive thing settled all around him.

Something geometrical happened. Shooting lines more vivid than before bed. A settling warmth, like a cold room slowly heated. Raymond's thoughts, or the feeling of them—an anxiety, and below that, a fear like a tiny dark lake, a pair of blind eyes staring out from a rock in the center. Caleb wanted to tell Raymond to let it go, that it was nothing, really, but he couldn't say anything. Instead, he saw everything, the pattern of everything. Information, mathematical and not, systematic, nonlinear, nongeometrical, nondimensional, organic, imagistic, emotional, sub-atomic, galactic—a four dimensional cube within a cube, shadows on a wall, a rotating self and not-self. Everything he'd ever seen, imagined, careened around him, and he around him, and at the heart of it, something dark, or the darkness was the heart of it, or both.

The next thing he remembered was the pressure of Raymond's arms under him, the pain of a sudden bright light. At first he thought that the darkness floating around the center of everything had finally gone, but then he realized that he was outside, that Raymond had carried him outside, and that the light was the sun. Raymond set him down

under an oak tree, brushed the hair from his eyes, said, “Are you all right? Are you okay?” Caleb stared at the branches above Raymond’s head, saw everything flattened, the branches growing out of Raymond’s head, and the abstractions came back to him, with his eyes open, fixed on the fractal branches of a leafy oak tree. For a moment, he didn’t exist.

“What was it?” Raymond said. “What happened? What did you see?”

“Bad air,” Caleb said. “Dizzy. I’m really hungry.”

Raymond stared at him, and for the first time, Caleb noticed how curious Raymond was about him, how there was a desperation in that curiosity, a sadness, a defeat or disappointment.

“Nothing?” Raymond said. “You saw nothing?”

RAYMOND HAD LEFT the week before, heading for San Francisco where, he said, he had to formulate his plans, create his future, invent himself, find another one of his selves. These were phrases Raymond always used. Caleb, sprawled across the remaining easy chair in his mother’s new living room, watching Micah and Rachel flip Native American Tarot Cards, his father flip through a large book of old Northwest pioneer folders, hadn’t really listened to what Raymond had to say. He always spoke as if he had total control over the future, the past, that it was all a story he was the author of. A boring evening. The lights were low, a candle or two above the fireplace, a low lamp beside Micah’s end of the couch.

Noah opened the front door, closed it, spent considerable time taking off a jacket, setting a suitcase or a bag on the floor, bumping into the table, new, where their mother had placed a telephone and a message pad and a bowl for holding car keys.

“How’s it going, guys?” Noah said.

“Cool,” Micah said.

“Hi Noah,” Rachel said.

They looked at Noah simultaneously, brushed the hair out of their eyes, smiled. Like twins. Caleb watched them, moving his legs a little.

“Caleb,” Noah said. “How’s it going?”

Caleb watched Micah flip cards, playing a game of War, as far as he could tell. He scratched the back of his neck and kept on watching.

“You can afford to be polite,” Noah said.

Micah had let his hair grow long. It was as black as Rachel’s, hung just like hers over his forehead. Caleb’s hair was a medium brown, a little lighter in the summer, a little darker if he didn’t wash it for a day.

“Christ,” Noah said. He walked around the chair and stood in front of Caleb, hands on hips, blocking his view of the others. Their father continued to page through the book on his lap, but Caleb saw a smile on his face.

“Okay,” Caleb said, shifting to an upright position. He held two fingers to either side of his head, quoting, “Hello, Noah.”

Noah rolled his eyes, seemed about to say something. He was nineteen, had been away to college but had come home for a visit. Caleb had forgotten his mother’s

announcement earlier at dinner, had forgotten that the dinner itself was late in anticipation of Noah's potentially early arrival. But it was nine o'clock, the exact time Noah had said he would arrive. He was always punctual. He had straight blond hair, bangs which insisted on falling forward. His face was narrow, unlike the rest of the family, except their mother, and his build slender, muscular, as if his body would never see fat no matter what he did. He had a long, sharp nose, not the bluntness of everyone else's, and his ears lay flat against his scalp. He looked like their mother.

In the past, they had teased him about being the product of their mother's affair with a host of fictional characters: the Norwegian fishmonger at the Sunday Market, the family accountant, the box boy down at the grocery store. Noah was the first child of their mother, their father's forth. No one thought seriously about his illegitimacy, but the playacting had become a sort of truth among them all. Noah was no-nonsense. He hated Raymond. Raymond ignored him. He might as well have been from some other family.

He glared for a minute longer at Caleb, who closed his eyes and yawned, then smacked his lips, the one thing he knew Noah hated.

Finally, Noah left, slid through the swinging door into the kitchen where their mother had gone some time earlier to make an afternoon Gin and tonic.

"You know," Micah said, "you're so cruel to him."

"I don't have to love everyone, do I?" Caleb said, looking at his father, who remained impassive, his slight smile now gone. "Dad didn't say hi either."

"That's Dad," Rachel said.

"Well, this is me," Caleb said.

“Immature is what it is,” Micah said.

“I don’t like him,” Caleb said. “I mean, I really don’t. Why should I? He has no soul. I can tell. There’s nothing to him, not like any of the rest of us, even Hannah and Leah. Not like us at all.”

“Not like Raymond, you mean,” Micah said.

“You said it,” Caleb said. “But it’s like all Noah cares about is doing the right thing. When you fold a piece of paper, you do it this certain way. When you sharpen a pencil, you do it that way. There isn’t anything else going on.”

“What else should be going on?” Micah said.

“I don’t know,” Caleb said. He looked at Rachel, who, during Micah’s lull in the game, had taken to building a house out of her Tarot cards. “All I know is that for most people, I get the sense that there’s someone else inside them, someone watching, or learning, or pushing them to do something, go somewhere. I don’t know what I’m saying, exactly. But Noah doesn’t have it. He’s just a shell. Empty. Nothing inside there whatsoever.”

Micah seemed about to say something. Caleb’s father looked up, glanced at Caleb, then behind him. Caleb turned. Noah stood there, a Gin and tonic in his hand. Their mother was beside him, her arms crossed, a tall Gin and tonic in the crook of her arm, her string of pearls gleaming in the low living room light.

“Caleb,” she said. “What does that say about you? To be so cruel like that?”

Noah stared down at him and Caleb couldn’t tell if he was angry, or sad. His eyes were a little moist, or were they? And his mouth, was that an angry frown, a hurt one?

“It’s how I feel,” Caleb said. “I’m not taking it back.” Noah and he continued to stare at each other. For the first time, Caleb had absolutely no idea what Noah was thinking or feeling, and that uncertainty made him flash hot with shame.

WHEN CALEB WAS almost fifteen he hopped a bus to San Francisco to visit Raymond who had sent word about his new apartment in the foothills. It was late afternoon when the bus pulled onto the Golden Gate, the air foggy, close to the ground, the towers still visible in the unfocussed air—the Bank America building, black, square, the TransAmerican, a warped, extruded pyramid, even Coit Tower, a stack of rough-edged coins, yellow/white: all as immovable as tombstones in a misty graveyard. Gulls floated through the cables and just below road level—tiny, ghostly specks scaling all the impossible geometry. Caleb had seen nothing like it.

He waited for Raymond at the bus station. Across the street an old factory stood abandoned, the windows on the first two floors boarded, above that, opaque, dull beige. A few broken. An old, thin, wrinkled woman waited beside him. She smacked her lips, clutched at something in the skirt above her crotch, as if fumbling for dice. Everywhere people crowded, walked, some slow, some fast, some in windbreakers, others in long canvas coats. These people, this city: not part of the human race Caleb thought he knew about.

Raymond finally showed, dressed in a white button down shirt, a dark blue paisley tie, black pants, oversize black leather shoes, dull and scuffed. “You’re the first one to visit me,” he said. “Micah seems uninterested. Rachel’s a little young.”

“What about Noah?” Caleb said.

“Well,” Raymond said. “Noah. There’s always Noah.”

They laughed. Caleb stared at the tops of buildings when he wasn’t staring down large rolling hills. He bumped into Raymond often enough that Raymond finally stopped him and told him he would have to take his time. Let the city grow, let the perspectives happen over days, not all at once. “Savor the city,” he said. “Taste the flavors as they come down the pipe. Don’t gulp.”

They climbed, they descended, the buildings loomed over Caleb. He liked the looming. It was as if the entire city were paying attention to him, stooping to hear what he or Raymond had to say. They reached Fisherman’s Wharf just as the sun slipped behind the ocean. Raymond stopped beside a restaurant and breathed deeply, waving his hands as if drawing more air toward his face. Caleb watched his expression, the closed eyes and long eyelashes, the ears like handles on either side of his head, the wrinkles around his eyes: new, Caleb thought, the broad, closed-mouthed smile, the flaring nostrils.

“Smell that?” Raymond finally said. “Delicious!”

“Dead fish,” Caleb said. “That’s all I smell.”

“No,” he said. “Life!” They walked for a while among the crowds of brightly shirted people, bouncing joggers, both men and women with pony tails swinging in circles. Caleb admitted to Raymond that he was hungry and Raymond stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Several middle-aged women almost bounced into them, and then walked around. Raymond stood absolutely still, his face slightly upturned, his eyes

closed. To Caleb he looked as if he were receiving a message from the mothership. At first Caleb flushed red, glanced at the annoyed people who had to walk around them, but he wasn't embarrassed for long. This was Raymond, after all. He lived like no other person. He was the center of everything, no matter where he was and he didn't even know it.

"Okay," Raymond said, opening his eyes. "I think it's okay. I know just the place."

They walked one block, turned a corner, ducked into a restaurant decorated in rough wood and rusty fishing tackle. They got a table, drank water, ordered from a waiter who wore a goatee and wrote left handed. They tore at the French bread set before them, lathered it with butter and dug in.

"Have you ever been in love?" Raymond said.

"Love?" Caleb said. The bread was like cardboard in his mouth. He swallowed as best he could. He shrugged. He looked left and right.

There was a girl at school. Lee Ann. She was taller than he was, medium-length brown hair, maybe not as pretty as a lot of the other girls. Too tall. She wore long corduroy pants with the ends rolled up and torn and unraveled in the back from being caught under her heels. Her legs turned in slightly at the knees as if someone had pressed down on her until her legs buckled, joining at the knees for extra support. She had dark skin, the kind that tanned after an hour or two in the sun. Her eyes were green. When he talked to her he joked around, made clever puns, used a sarcastic tone of voice even when he wasn't being sarcastic. "I kind of like these green beans," he'd say at lunch. He really

did like the green beans, the tin-can taste, the salt, but she laughed, he supposed, because he was so good at sounding disgusted. For weeks he saw no one else in the halls between classes. He knew her every class, knew the paths she took from one to the other. She was always just around the corner, maybe behind him, carrying her books pressed under her small breasts, her hair, thin, straight, sprouting from a cowlick just off the middle of her forehead. That was love, he guessed. The burning embarrassment, the unwillingness to do anything to avoid it.

Before that there had been a blond kid in the eighth grade, a boy, shorter than Caleb, with a crew cut. He never took off the brown jacket he always wore. He dressed in blue jeans, white tennis shoes, and he never smiled. His eyes, a pale blue, seemed as old as Caleb's father's. He'd actually talk about what went on in history. "Imagine standing there in the Civil War," he said, "lined up next to all your friends to shoot people. Just standing there facing a line of people shooting back at you. Horrible." He put himself into everything. Caleb wanted nothing more, at the end of eighth grade, than to follow that kid around, just get into being like him, never smiling, always serious, never making jokes, never being sarcastic. But the kid did not make friends. Never invited Caleb home. Never accepted invitations. Didn't show up for ninth grade. That was probably love, too. Whenever he thought Lee Ann was making fun of him, or only just tolerated him as a joke, he'd think of that boy and how he would handle it, and his frustration melted away.

"I guess," Caleb said. "I mean, I'm pretty sure."

"Well," Raymond said, nodding over Caleb's head. "Take a look at her."

A few tables away, a woman took an order. She had curly, longish red hair, wide hips, a Roman nose.

“Who is she?” Caleb said.

“I call her Eve sometimes,” Raymond said. “Or Cleopatra, whatever fits my mood.”

He told Caleb that he’d seen her a few weeks before while exploring the city. For fun, he’d found himself a spot on the sidewalk at the end of the boardwalk and set up an old fashioned manual typewriter, “Dad’s,” he said, “from his student days.” He earned small change typing one page stories about a Chinese master and the simple peasants who mistook what he said for wisdom. “It was easy to do,” Raymond said. “In various ways, the old man always said the same thing: there’s nothing so complicated and soul killing as language won’t make it worse. For a while I believed that. All pain and suffering was the result of language.” She’d come up to him, her hair in elaborate braids piled on top of her head. She wore faded jeans a little too short so they fell a few inches above her ankles and her feet. Her legs had tiny blonde hairs reflecting the late afternoon light. She wore moccasins. She wore a white button down shirt with a tiny collar. She had rolled up her sleeves. She was carrying a notebook and an orange. She asked for a story and Raymond hacked one out, something about the Old Man pointing out to celibate monks that love was not poison. The woman sat beside him and watched people pass, watched the calm, gray ocean rolling just the other side of the docks. “And,” Raymond said, “the way she peeled that orange totally destroyed my parable. I couldn’t think at all. She stuck her thumbnail into the top, twisted it around as precisely as a surgeon, pulled out

the stem and set it on her notebook as carefully as she would a sacred relic. Her fingers were thin and delicate, their tips polished fingernail red. She used her thumbnail to cut lines of longitude along the orange globe, north to south, south to north, instead of pulling the skin off in a spiral. Amazing!” He typed as slowly as he could, hacked out a story while watching her eat. “I fell in love with her nose first,” Raymond said. “A big nose. Reminded me of the nose on Ramses’ mummy, you know. But there’s wisdom in that nose, the way it pointed wherever she looked as if she saw something a little farther out, or farther in, than I could see, as if she were really only an observer. And her high cheek bones. And those lower calves and the finest of blonde hairs.” She gave him some coins when he gave her the story and he’d almost yelled out, “come back later for part two!”

Raymond’s apartment: tables beneath the wide silled windows, pale green curtains of hand-woven cotton. Dull-green books, black, dark red, dusty white, but not too many, not like Micah’s room. No pictures on them. Long titles. Bamboo graphics, or odd symbols. “The alchemist’s cookbook,” Raymond laughed. Low lamps everywhere. A dull green rug over dark wood floors which creaked under Caleb’s feet. It was everything Caleb had hoped, even though he’d had no expectations. As he watched Raymond make tea, drag one unlabeled plastic bag after another out of the cupboard, he realized he’d never been in a place where Raymond lived.

“How can you tell what kind they are?” Caleb said, fingering the nearest bag.

Raymond open one, sniffed. “Hm,” he said. “Who needs a name?” He lit the gas stove with a match, put a pot of water over it and dropped the tea in.

“I’ve heard,” Caleb said, “that you’re supposed to pour hot water over the tea, not put the tea in the water.”

“I’ve heard that, too,” Raymond said.

“Oh,” Caleb said.

They sat in the living room in two low chairs, cloth stretched over metal frames, and Caleb talked about movies he had seen, about what Rachel had been doing, how she had refused to skip ahead in school, except math classes. “She calls the high school seniors dopes,” he said. “They look at me strangely, now. Like they respect me because my sister’s a genius, but they don’t like it for one minute.”

Raymond laughed out loud for a long time, for too long, it seemed to Caleb.

There was something he wanted to talk to Raymond about. Lately he had begun to feel a little lost, he said. Micah wrote all the time. He started using a typewriter, but it was so loud during the nights that he moved it to the basement. And Rachel, of course, giggled like an idiot in front of the television, giggled over magazines with her friends, and pasted equations all over her otherwise bare bedroom walls.

“Ah, Rachel,” Raymond said. “That’s good to hear. I’m glad you told me about that, Caleb.”

Raymond looked at him, his grin as wide as it ever had been. Caleb grinned back, wanted to ask why lately he had begun to feel bad about things, or sad, or indifferent: he didn’t know how to describe it. He had nothing like math. Nothing like science fiction. He liked the sports his friends liked, but never followed them, played only when they dragged him into games. He’d forced himself to read some of Micah’s collection, but

could hardly do it, and couldn't remember what he'd read. He wanted to ask Raymond what was the matter. Wasn't he good enough for Raymond to figure out? Wasn't he worth setting on some road or another? Was he no better than Noah?

For a moment, Raymond's expression faded, sensing, Caleb hoped, that he wanted to say something, but before he could, before he could find out what would happen next, there was a faint knocking at the door.

"My red-haired Cleopatra!" Raymond said when he opened the door. He hugged her for a long time, buried his face in her big red hair. She looked over her shoulder at Caleb.

"My half-brother," Raymond said.

Caleb nodded, let her shake his hand which he let lie in her grip like it was dead. She and Raymond talked, while Caleb looked out the window, leafed through books, stared at her, at Raymond, and eventually they all went to bed.

In the middle of the night, he heard the floor creaking. Rhythmic. He couldn't figure out what it was until he heard gasping, then a low moan, Raymond's moan. "Mary," he said. "Oh, Mary." Caleb plugged his ears and repeated, "Sick, sick, sick, sick," to himself until he fell asleep.

Until Mary left the next morning, Caleb pretended to be asleep while she creaked around the floor in a man's bathrobe.

After late morning breakfast, Caleb asked Raymond when he was going to get married.

"Married?" Raymond said. "No, never. Not her."

“I thought you loved her.”

“Desperately,” he said. “But the kind of love we have fades. Everything fades, you know. It’s like the world is San Francisco fog.”

“There’s none this morning.”

“It’s just a metaphor,” Raymond said.

Caleb didn’t know what the word meant. He felt hot again. He opened the living room window, looked out at the rows of houses, each painted a different color. He listened to the traffic. A siren whistled above the general din.

“Then how come you’re not going to get married?” he finally said.

“Not enough time,” Raymond said. “And it’s not my path, not in my cards.”

“I thought everyone—”

“The Hindus believe that some of our lives are spent learning about the value of money, and trade, and worldly success. Other lives are about family, marriage, children, sex and lots of it.”

Caleb didn’t like Raymond talking about sex. It didn’t seem right. He wanted to go into the street and take a long, long walk. Maybe find some shells near the ocean, if he could get that far.

“And some lives,” Raymond said, “are about getting beyond those things.”

“Beyond?”

“That’s right.”

“What’s beyond?”

“That’s not something you can talk about.”

“Why not? You think I’m too young?”

“You just can’t. Words don’t work. Do you remember the mine shaft?”

“No,” Caleb said. “Why can’t she go with you?”

“There’s not enough time,” Raymond said. “There’s only a year.”

“A year?”

“I knew what was going to happen when we visited that mine shaft. Don’t you remember?”

“No,” Caleb said. “What’s going to happen in a year?”

“I don’t know,” Raymond said. “Not exactly. I mean, I don’t know what outward, physical form it will take, but something will happen.”

“Oh,” Caleb said.

“If you remembered the mine shaft, you’d know what I was talking about.”

Caleb vaguely remembered the mine shaft, but the memory scared him, blackened his vision a little, as if the thought sucked oxygen out of his brain, made him unsteady on the window sill where he shivered in the cold air. There were bits and pieces. The flashlight going out. A giant tree. The sound of gravel crunching underfoot. When he tried to remember any more of that, his body tightened, at first, and then relaxed and went numb, as if he were giving something up, as if he were drugged, and for days he’d want to do absolutely nothing. Over the past year, this had happened several times. He wouldn’t care about tests at school, about his parents or Micah or Rachel. His mother would have to force him out of bed, into the shower, out to school. And then it would pass.

“Can we go to the top of a skyscraper?” Caleb said. “I want to see what this place looks like from up there.”

“Sure,” Raymond said. “No problem.”

HE WAS FIFTEEN. Too old for silliness. He’d already taken down the mobile by the closet door, had arranged it in an old shoe box, stored it on the top shelf in the closet. He did not need toys hanging from his ceiling. And he was too old to be waking up in the middle of the night, and though there was nothing he could do about that, he didn’t have to creep out into the hallway, step gently to the stairs, climb up, sit outside the door, waiting to be invited in. He had resisted it for a year of Raymond’s visits. He did not need the humiliation. But this time, he couldn’t help it. He sat cross-legged in front of the door, wearing only boxer shorts, a loose t-shirt, and listened to the muffled, subtle voices, let the anger boil in him.

Why didn’t they let him in? He was sure they knew he was outside.

Why did he want to go in? Why wouldn’t he knock? Why not say something earlier in the day, letting them know? Why did he expect them to figure it all out?

Maybe they *had* figured it out. Maybe this was some test. Maybe a battle of wills.

The yellow strip of light didn’t change. Never had. Caleb brushed his hands over his head, pulled his hair back until the pressure lifted his eyebrows.

Ridiculous, stupid, idiotic, humiliating: just plain dumb.

Maybe they didn’t want him in. Maybe they never had. Never would.

Still, he waited. He closed his eyes. He pulled his right foot toward his left knee, eased it up, arched his back, waited. He pulled his left foot toward his right leg, then stopped. His knees hurt: not a sharp pain, but a pressure, like they were going to snap. He unfolded his legs. He opened his eyes. He stood, touched the door, felt the figures' cold textures, the slightly sticky finish.

Okay, he thought. Enough is enough. He stomped out of the room, pounding his heels into the floor, and headed down the stairs. A few more years, he thought. College. Career. Real life. I'll never have to come here again. I'll have my own yellow light. I'll invite them to come over, shine that light out the window, and then pretend not to be home.

Halfway down the stairs, he quieted his steps, walked gently down the hall to the short balcony overlooking the living room. He sat down at the head of the stairs. No one was home. Micah was at college. Rachel was at math camp. Noah was years gone, in his last year of college in the Bay Area. His mother was in her bedroom on the first floor. He hadn't needed to walk quietly.

The ceiling above the living room was vaulted, like a Church, curved triangles meeting in the center. Along the stairs, seven uncurtained gothic windows descended, letting in a mixture of moon and street light. The vents hummed, as they always did, but nothing moved. Somewhere, a clock ticked. The kitchen, Caleb guessed. He rested his head on his hands, rocked himself a little, letting the rhythm relax him. He heard footsteps upstairs, a door open, but he kept his head down, kept himself relaxed. He felt something behind him, then an arm around his shoulders.

“What’s up buddy?” Raymond said.

“Nothing,” Caleb said. “Nothing you need to know about.”

“Ah,” Raymond said. He squeezed Caleb’s shoulders, then let go, moved away just a little. “You wanted us to invite you in, didn’t you?” he said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Out there,” he said, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder. “Or, I mean, up there. We used to find you in the early morning, you know, lying there, sound asleep, your head on your hands like a sentimental painting.”

“Come on,” Caleb said. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes,” Raymond said. He sighed, impatient. “Of course I was kidding. Lying, in fact. All part of a plan.”

“I thought so,” Caleb said. He hated the poutiness of his own voice. He was too old for jealousy. He had learned a long time ago never to be jealous of Raymond. But then here he was. Jealous.

Raymond sighed again, shook his hands, pressed them to his knees. His legs jutted out over the top of the stairs, his feet planted several steps down. He drummed his fingers. All Caleb could see of his face were his two big ears silhouetted in the light from the gothic windows. “You shouldn’t be angry with me,” Raymond said. “You never know. This might be the last time you’ll ever see me.”

“Right,” Caleb said. “You’ll always come back. Half the time no one knows where you go, but you always come back.”

“I always have,” he said.

“You’re always trying to be so damn mysterious,” Caleb said. “I don’t get it. When I was younger, I bought it all. Every bit of it.”

“And now you don’t?”

“That’s right,” Caleb said. “You’re no different than Mom and Dad and Leah telling me about Santa Claus. Making me believe silly things. Stupid things.”

“Like what?” Raymond said.

Caleb pulled his knees together, pulled them into his chest.

“What did I make you believe?” Raymond said.

“I don’t know,” Caleb said. “Just the whole thing. The whole mystery.”

“What mystery?” Raymond said.

“You’re doing it again,” Caleb said. Behind them, at the far end of the hall, a toilet flushed, and after that, water rushed into a sink. “Your voice,” Caleb said. “Like you’re teaching me something, leading me on to some knowledge or other. There is no knowledge, is there?”

“There is,” Raymond said. His voice had changed. Much softer, much quieter, as if he were father away, or on the other end of a phone line.

“Then what is it?”

“You already know,” Raymond said. “Better than I. You’ll always know better than I.”

Caleb reached out and smacked Raymond on the shoulder. “*That’s* what I mean,” he said. “*That*. What you just said. I don’t *get* it. Can’t you see that? You’re making it up. Or your crazy. Or you’re a fool.”

Raymond said nothing. He stood, brushed at his pants. He stepped near Caleb, who looked away, not sure Raymond could see that he wasn't looking at him. He felt a touch on his shoulder, heard Raymond step down the stairs. He looked into the living room, waiting for a light to go on in the kitchen, but instead, he saw only a small flash, and then the front door shut.

A pair of cold hands touched his neck. Caleb unfolded and stood. The hands moved to his shoulders.

"Dad!" Caleb said. "You scared me."

"Sorry," his father said. "Did you talk to Raymond?"

"A little."

"Come on," his father said. They went down the stairs and into the kitchen. His father flipped on the old light above the sink. A dull yellow filled the room. "How will we all get along without Raymond?"

"What?" Caleb said. He began to shiver, felt the cold work down from his shoulders along his back. Felt it brush his Achilles tendons.

His father put a kettle on the stove, turned on the gas, reached for a box of tea in the cabinet over the stove. "I thought you said he talked to you? He said he was going to talk to you."

Caleb pushed through the kitchen door, crossed the living room. He couldn't see a thing but he made it through avoiding the couch, the end tables, the telephone and key table. He pulled open the door and rushed out, turned the corner. Raymond's car wasn't in the usual place. He rushed back around the corner. No car. He ran back into the

house, opened the door to the garage. Boxes everywhere, no cars. Outside, he ran down the street. It was late at night. No lights in any of the windows. The air had grown sharply cold, and only a distant freeway, an even more distant river boat horn disturbed the long, long silence.

CHAPTER 4

THE ONE THING Caleb had been certain of was that while he spent time with Noah, first at his house, later, on a short camping trip Noah wanted for his kids, things would be normal, perhaps even generic. Typical family dinners. Typical selection of cereals. Typical greetings. Typical nice, reasonable, non-threatening conversation. Nothing strange. No mysteries. He had never before spent time with Noah, but he expected these things because he had always thought that it was what Noah—cursed to have been born in a family with Raymond, their father, Caleb himself—had always wanted. These expectations were destroyed the moment he and Micah got off the plane.

On the way to California, Caleb had stopped in Denver to switch flights so he could travel the rest of the way with Micah. They had a drink each on the plane. Micah, excited and talkative, told Caleb all about his first novel recently accepted, about a boy, autistic in one dimension, a hero in another, and about the difficulties of the sequel his publisher insisted he write. When they got off the plane, they were greeted by Noah and his two children, David, a sandy haired, freckly faced kid, eleven years-old, and Becky, nine, hair as dark and straight as Rachel's. That's when Micah closed down, when things started to get weird, at least for Caleb. That's when he started to notice things.

The first was Noah's wife, Sheila—recognizable though he hadn't seen her since their wedding. At some distance behind Noah and his children, Sheila talked animatedly with Rachel and a tall, husky man with bushy blond hair. Rachel's boyfriend, Caleb

guessed. Halsey. Sheila laughed, then followed Rachel's glance, saw the two of them, Caleb and Micah, standing beside Noah and her children. Her face relaxed into a neutral stare, her hands came together, then lifted, her arms wrapped around her as if to support her breasts.

Then, Noah said, "Kids, your Uncle Caleb, your Uncle Micah."

David reached up and hugged Caleb, then reached up for Micah while Becky hugged Caleb. Micah wouldn't let the children hug him. He nodded, hands in pockets, then backed away.

"I'd forgotten you had children," Micah said.

"Not surprised," Noah said. "Surprised you remember me at all." The bitter words seemed unfelt, automatic.

Becky stood quietly next to her father, tapping her chin, staring at Caleb, then at Micah, kept on staring at him, her body—except for the tapping—impossibly still. David's head darted back and forth, as if he were keeping tabs on the crowd. He tugged at Caleb's arm. "Dad says you're crazy, like Uncle Raymond."

"You've met him?" Caleb said.

"Dad talks about him all the time," David said. "Was he really crazy?"

"Do I seem crazy?" Caleb said.

"Are you smart?" David said. "Dad said Raymond was really smart and that you were too."

That was the second strange thing. Noah had said that he was smart, that he was crazy? If Raymond was crazy, in Noah's eyes, Caleb wanted to be crazy in the same way. A compliment. Strange.

"I'm smart," David said. "Like you."

"I bet you are," Caleb said. He glanced at Noah, who watched the approaching Rachel, Halsey and Sheila.

Caleb hugged Rachel, shook Halsey's large, soft hand, turned toward Sheila, who had her arms around her children's shoulders, resting them, Caleb thought, or, and this was the third strange thing, protecting them.

"Hi, Sheila," he said.

She nodded. He had no idea what he was going to say to her, but he wanted to say something. "Beautiful children," he said. "You've done a great job." He felt sudden embarrassment.

"What do you mean by that?" Sheila said. She turned toward Noah. "What did he mean by that?"

"Let's get out of this mad house," Noah said. "Airports. There ought to be a better way!"

LATER ON, AT Noah's house, after an hour or two of uncomfortable silences and remember-whens, Sheila left the living room to start dinner. Caleb waited a bit, then followed her into the kitchen.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” Caleb said. “So long since the wedding. And I was just a kid, then.”

“Yes,” Sheila said. She had taken lettuce out from the refrigerator, began to rinse it under the tap.

“It was good to see Noah again,” Caleb said. “It’s an odd thing, but I see a lot in his face now, you know? A sense of suffering, maybe. He’s really lived these years, you know?”

Sheila put some of the lettuce into a spinner and began to turn the crank.

“It’s just an odd thing,” Caleb said. “I never would have expected it. Says more about me, I guess, than him.”

She put the first batch of lettuce into a large glass bowl, the second batch into the spinner.

“Just curious,” Caleb said. “Why do the salad first? Doesn’t it wilt?”

Sheila let go the spinner. She pulled a rubber band from her pony tail, tightened her hair and retied. She looked at Caleb, paused to look at him. He didn’t know what she was trying to tell him. Was he annoying her? Was it something else? What a strange, strange woman.

THE NEXT MORNING Caleb woke up with a splitting headache. He and Micah slept on cots in what was designed to be a bedroom, but was filled instead with boxes, broken lamps, old books. The room was dark and brown, and in the early morning only a glimmer of light leaked in from the window where the curtains pulled away at the top.

His head throbbed, his left eye out of focus. He slipped out of bed. Maybe it was something he had eaten the night before. Maybe Sheila had poisoned his salad for the remark he'd made. Maybe it was a brain tumor. He sat in the bathroom, trying to go. He peed instead. He washed his hands, his face, and stared in the mirror. His bangs hung in front of his face, wet and stringy, and his blurry left eye distorted everything. His head veered to the right, as if the mirror were warped, or one side of his hairline had begun to recede, or as if an enormous black hole sucked at him.

The pain was so severe, he had to turn off the light, so severe, he could feel nothing else, not his feet against the floor as he stumbled along the hall back to his cot, not his finger tips along the wall, nor the cot's edge against his legs. He eased himself down.

"What's up?" Micah said.

Caleb groaned, pulled the covers over his face. Even the thin beams from above the curtain were too much.

"Just a little headache," he managed to say. "Nothing to worry about."

"Worry?" Micah said. "Who's worrying? Should we be worrying?"

Caleb felt his breath hover between his face and the blanket. The warmth soothed him. If he held perfectly still, the pain moved out of his head, diffused through his body, a cold tremor enveloped in a thick, hot pressure.

Later on, he felt cool air in front of his face, the pressure of light against his closed eyes. "Caleb?" Rachel said. "Caleb, are you all right?"

“Just a little headache,” he said. “Sleep will fix it.” He opened his eyes to slits, saw Rachel’s pale face swim into view. Her mouth was gathered into a tight line, her eyebrows straight across her forehead. He closed his eyes.

“Aspirin?” she said.

“No,” he said.

“Water?” she said.

“No,” he said.

“Has this happened before?” she said. “Are you keeping a secret, Caleb?”

He moved his head side to side, then winced. Though his eyes were closed, he felt the room spinning as if he were tied to a lathe.

“We’re worried,” she said. “In case that matters to you. It’s been hours.”

He felt her hand on his. It felt good. He started to slip into sleep, and then she started speaking. “I didn’t want to come on this trip,” she said. “I didn’t think it was a good idea. Not really. School starts in a couple of weeks. It’s not good to miss it. And then there’s Halsey.”

She squeezed his hand, lifted it, set it down.

“What?” he wanted to say. “What about him?” but the words roiled around inside him as if pressing to be vomited.

When she let go of his hands, she said something else, but he didn’t hear. Already he had fallen asleep.

When he woke up again, Micah was talking to him. “Don’t die,” Micah said. “The others think it’s just stress, or a migraine, no reason to go to a doctor. I guess I

agree. I mean that's what I want to believe. But I always believe the safer explanation is the true one, you know? But that's not always the case. I never told you about John, did I? Never told anyone."

Caleb tried to stay awake. Tried to move his hands. Nothing. The smell of smoke filled the room, old, stale, cigarette smoke, and Micah's voice turned into a strange singing with lots of O's, like the woman who lived next door to him. The O's were soothing. The pain's sharp edge seemed dulled, but the throbbing was still here. Even with his eyes closed, it seemed to him that his whole body was expanding, contracting, pulsing with the beat of his heart, as if all he were was a heart throbbing and rocking in someone's open chest cavity.

And then there she was.

Sheila.

She was standing in a basement, dark at both ends, vaguely light on either side of her. She was screaming, a large, open mouthed scream. He heard nothing, saw only the black hole in the center of her head turning from side to side like a lighthouse. The air gray, murky, as if he were at the bottom of a black and white pool. He floated along, getting closer and closer to her mouth, when something moved out of her and toward him, another mouth wide and toothy, like a shark, a human shark, what a shark might look like if humans turned into them, the eyes comically above the snout, the teeth wide and flat, the tongue pink, articulate. The tongue shouldered him aside as the beast glided over him and Caleb turned to watch it swim into a bright light, the gentle left and right of its tail fanning the light into a slow strobe.

Then Michelle appeared, standing with her arms over a tall stack of books at Barnes and Noble. She was impossibly tall. The room was gentle and bright, dark green floors, bright brown shelves, every book spine a different color, like a rainbow throbbing along geometrical throats.

“Hi,” Michelle said. She held her fingers out, examined her nails, looked at the ceiling.

“Michelle,” Caleb said. “Have you ever walked down main street when the buildings leaned in to listen?”

“I’ve seen the trees in May,” Michelle said. “They were double exposed.” She ducked behind the shelves and Caleb ran to find her in the coffee shop. She wasn’t there. He saw a hand tapping near the cash registers. Michelle crouched below counter level, looking, he assumed, for a plastic bag. He touched her hand, pulled on her and Sheila stood before him in a white dress, her eyes sunglasses huge, her hair pulled back too tightly, sticking straight out behind her as if she faced a stiff wind, a strong current.

“Let go of me,” she said. “Disgusting!”

“What?” Caleb said. “I washed my hands after lunch!”

He was under a ping pong table. Skinny, gangly David was with him. The ball pinged and pinged above them, but no legs chased around the table. “The number sixty-four is an amazing color,” David said. “Eight times eight. Or as grandpa says, eight *and* eight.”

They were sitting in a wire cage looking over the spillway of a dam. Water gushed over the top, churned into the green river, sending wall after wall careening down the steep canyon.

“Look at that,” Caleb said.

David stood up, starting jumping up and down. The cage wobbled, shook.

“Knock it off,” Caleb said.

David kept on jumping.

“Damn it,” Caleb said. “I said stop.”

“I’m smart enough to know when it’s dangerous,” David said.

The water over the spillway began to rise. Caleb felt tiny droplets against his ankles, against his knuckles clutching the cage’s floor. The water began to peel the dam away, push cement blocks into the flood, punching holes. The spillway rose and widened.

“Stop,” Caleb said.

“Sixty-four is a great color,” David said. “Becky prefers thirty-two or one twenty-eight.”

The water was a white noise below them, the dam having given way to the flood. The water kept on going. Caleb looked up, looked side to side. The cage hung from a giant Roman arch, and despite David, who was now jumping rope, the cage seemed solid as a rock.

He opened his eyes and felt himself floating. The pain was gone. His hair was wet. The room was dark and someone was looking at him. He sat up.

“What?” he said.

“Do you want to color?” David said. He was sitting on Micah’s cot.

“What time is it?” Caleb said.

“Two-thirty,” David said. “In the morning.”

Caleb brushed his damp hair back, pinched his wet T-shirt away from his body. He felt the sheets. Wet. David sat watching him, as plain as day in the night, his hair falling over his face, his pajamas horizontal, pen-striped prison garb. “How long have you been talking to me?” he said.

“Not long,” David said. “I thought you were awake. Your eyes were open. You were saying something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t sound like English.”

Caleb lay back on the wet sheets, shivered, put his arms above his head, then behind. “Is there someone else in here?”

“No,” David said.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not stupid,” he said. “Anyway, I couldn’t sleep, so I came in here. I heard you mumbling.”

“I feel a lot better.”

“You want to color tomorrow? I’m in the mood to color.”

“Okay,” Caleb said. He was certain someone else was in the room. Where was Micah? Was there someone out in the hall? He thought he heard something move. A weight shift. Felt it more than heard it.

“I’d like to sleep,” Caleb said. “You’d better get back to bed.”

“Okay,” David said. He jumped off the cot, padded toward the door. Something in the hall retreated.

“Did you hear that?” Caleb said.

“Hear what?” David said.

“All right then,” Caleb said. “Crayons at dawn.”

David left the room and Caleb closed his eyes. He wondered what Michelle was doing. Five-thirty in the morning in New York. Maybe she was just getting up. Maybe she was getting ready to visit his apartment before work so she could water his plant. Maybe she had stayed the night there, slept in his bed. He wanted to sleep in hers. He wanted to smell her shampoo on the pillow. He wanted to watch the back of her head as the heater kicked on, wonder where she was when she slept, if she still saw those bright lines of green and blue under the porch.

CALEB HAD GOTTEN so much sleep with the headache that even though everyone else, after dinner, after a rented movie, had gone to sleep, he found himself restless. He thought that maybe a walk would be good, around the block, through the alley. The neighborhood, Micah had said, seemed riddled with secret paths and alleyways. Ripe for

exploration. Micah had done a lot of walking since they'd arrived, seemed to want to keep to himself, just as he did in Colorado, where he lived on a mountain.

Outside, Caleb glanced back at the house, saw a strip of light beneath the garage door, doubled-back to find Noah in the garage hanging sleeping bags on a clothesline he had rigged from the window to just above the washing machine. He fluffed the bags, sniffed them, sometimes hugged them to clap the dust out. When he noticed Caleb, he nodded, said nothing.

“Good idea,” Caleb said. “This camping trip, I mean.”

“I think it's good for the kids,” Noah said.

“And us, too,” Caleb said. “All of Mom's kids hanging out. No Hannah, Leah, Raymond.”

“Amen to that,” Noah said.

“Look,” Caleb said. He moved toward a sleeping bag but Noah waved him back, muttered something about doing it himself, what he needed to relax. “Look,” Caleb said. “I'm sorry about all those years ago. I was a real bastard. You didn't deserve it.”

“I didn't?” Noah said.

“All those times you tried to get me to focus, to study,” Caleb said. “You were just trying to help. I appreciate it.”

“Lot of good it did,” Noah said.

“I don't think there was anything either of us could have done about that.”

“Maybe you're right,” Noah said.

“Anyway,” Caleb said. “Thanks for not making me out a villain to your kids.”

“I try to give them a positive image,” Noah said.

Noah looked up from behind the sleeping bags, his hair twisted over his head as if he had been sleeping. He fluffed the sleeping bags some more, tested the clothesline’s tension, began to sort through a box of old camping dishes.

“Where’d you get all this stuff?” Caleb said. “I never knew you liked camping.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” Noah said. “When we were in college, Sheila and I, we used to camp almost every weekend. We used to camp after David was born, too, but by the time Becky came along, life got a little complicated. You know, the job, bills, all that.”

“Yeah,” Caleb said.

Noah glanced up at him, then grinned, finally laughed. Caleb joined in. “Hard to believe you had kids, career and a house before you were my age,” Caleb said. “I must seem irresponsible to you.”

“A little,” Noah said.

“Do you ever wish you hadn’t done it?” Caleb said. “Hadn’t gotten married, you know, gotten involved in all of this?”

Noah stood, pressed the small of his back. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Caleb said. “Just a question.”

“You think I didn’t make the right choices?” Noah said. “You think I did this because it was ‘the right thing’ and not what I wanted?”

“I didn’t say that,” Caleb said.

“You’ve been saying it all your life,” Noah said.

Caleb leaned against the garage door, listened to the hinges groan as he shifted his weight. “Maybe you’re right,” he said, thinking of the curtains across the courtyard at home, all those curtains and all those invisible lives behind them.

“I did what I wanted to do,” Noah said. “I still do.”

“That’s good,” Caleb said. “That’s really good. I just wish I had that. I wish that when I chose to do something, I could stick with it. I mean, I *try* to stick with it, but then it just goes to pieces. Or I do. I burn out.”

“You never could stick to anything,” Noah said. “Raymond’s fault.”

Caleb pushed forward. The garage door groaned and rattled.

Noah glanced at the springs to one side of the door. “I’m going to have to install that garage door opener one of these days,” he said. “Maybe get a whole new door. One of those segmented kinds, you know what I mean?”

“Raymond’s fault?” Caleb said. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Noah said. He grinned at Caleb, went back to sorting out the dishes.

“You mean Raymond was teaching me something, right?” Caleb said. “That I didn’t get it? Or that he didn’t finish before he disappeared? Do you think he’s going to be at the wedding? Did Mom talk to you about it?”

Noah didn’t say anything. He had all the plates stacked, the cups lined up, the silverware sorted on a felt cloth. He looked at his watch. “She’s going through some hard times,” he said. “Not that you’d notice.”

“I live in New York, Noah,” Caleb said.

“I don’t think Raymond will show up,” Noah said. “I think he’s dead. And good riddance.”

“Good?” Caleb said.

Noah looked at his watch again, opened the door into the kitchen. “I just didn’t really like the guy,” Noah said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

For a moment, Caleb was alone in the garage, the space split by the line of hanging sleeping bags. Noah didn’t like Raymond, Caleb thought, because Raymond didn’t pay attention to Noah when Noah was a kid. That was all there was too it. But Noah didn’t need to be paid attention to. He was born knowing what he wanted. He didn’t need Raymond at all.

Caleb ducked under the bags, the thick cloth pulling across his back like a caress. He stood on the door step, stared at the lights for a full minute before he switched them off. He could still see them, three blue-white bars, as he walked through the house, down the stairs, into the small room he shared with Micah. He slipped under the covers, pulled them over his head and still saw the lights.

It’s because of Raymond, he thought. Raymond.

CALEB AND DAVID sat together in the backyard at a white table, beneath a white mesh umbrella. Caleb was coloring in one of Becky’s books. He kept thinking of Michelle running around the bookstore, or sitting in his apartment after watering his plant, wondering, as he did, why none of his neighbors ever opened their curtains. He was working on a picture of a giraffe stretching its neck toward a leafy tree. He tried to get

every blue color in the box of sixty-four into the giraffe's body, every red and orange color into the tree.

Noah's yard was wide and green and sloped down to a chain link fence overgrown with dark green bushes. David explained that on every Tuesday morning, a white dinosaur crept along the back road, sat rumbling hungrily in front of the dumpster, then grabbed it in two big hands and chucked the trash into a basket on its back.

"You won't get to see it before we go," David said.

"I believe you," Caleb said.

"I'm only talking about a garbage truck," David said. "I'm not a dumb kid."

"You're practically twelve," Caleb said. "Almost a teenager."

"Yuck," David said. "Who wants to be a teenager? Ever see 'em walk? They bounce up and down, or act like they're limping. Idiots."

Caleb set the crayons down, leaned back. When he was twelve, he had gone camping on a lake. It was the best time he'd ever had in his life, the best time he could remember. And then he had turned thirteen and things got complicated. Not dating, not being in or out in school: that was normal. Life just *felt* different, heavy, as if a tiny speck of dirt had worked its way into every cell in his body.

The house stood behind them, a lower, dark section out of which he and David had come to color, and above that, a large deck floating over the back lawn. When the glass door slid open, Caleb saw Micah walk onto the deck, a tall glass in his hand, sunglasses perched on his head. He looked at Caleb, who waved, then frowned and went back inside.

“I guess you’re right,” Caleb said. “At least it doesn’t last forever.”

“I’d like to skip it all together.”

“Or maybe stay a kid?”

“No,” David said. “Definitely not that.”

“What’s wrong with being a kid?”

David shrugged. “People think you’re an idiot. They say things like, ‘why don’t you go out and play?’ when you’d rather sit around and listen to ‘em talk.”

“Oh,” Caleb said. “I see what you mean.”

He searched through the crayons. What to use for the sky? What impossible color? Green? A green sky? Maybe black? He heard the patio door open again, looked over his shoulders. Sheila. She was laughing, talking about something to someone still inside. She wore a white dress down to mid-thigh, her hair pulled back by an elastic band, exposing her forehead which seemed, to Caleb, just a little too large, a little too white. She stopped laughing, stopped talking, moved toward the railing and looked down at them.

Caleb waved. She didn’t wave back.

“David?” she said softly, and then more loudly. “David! Time to come in. Come in right now. I’ve got something for you to do.”

“See?” David said. He closed his coloring book, shoved it under the others.

“Mom,” he shouted back. “I don’t want to come inside.”

“David!” Sheila shouted. “Come here this minute.”

He got up, started toward the lower level of the house. Caleb watched him, glanced up at Sheila, who continued staring at him until she heard the downstairs door shut behind David. She looked at him for a little while longer until he waved at her to come down and join him. She turned, walked to the sliding glass door, slid it open, stepped through, slid it back. Although the glare was thick—the tops of trees and passing clouds reflected back at him—he thought he could see her still there. Still watching.

EVEN BEFORE DINNER, things were strange. Noah was late back from work. He was training new employees, Sheila told Rachel in the kitchen. Caleb had come in for a glass of water, but stopped short before either Rachel or Sheila knew he was there. Sheila never spoke when he was around. Sometimes, in the morning, he'd come up from the spare room, walk into the kitchen and pour himself a cup of coffee, and then watch Sheila talking on the patio and laughing with Micah, or Rachel, or even Halsey, whom she had never met. Then he'd slide open the door, step out, and she'd stop. He'd been experimenting. It was true.

She had made dinner, had let it simmer on the stove, a beef stew of some sort, with potatoes, and a salad cooling in the refrigerator. Caleb was starving. Eventually, everyone ended up in the living room to watch television. Normally, David explained to everyone, the television was in the room where Rachel and Halsey slept, but because they had so many guests, they had moved it.

They watched a show about an angel doing good on earth, another about three divorced men forced to live together, “the odd triple,” Halsey said. No one laughed at the show, no one commented on the angelic sentimentalities. No talking at all.

Caleb sat on the couch, Rachel beside him, Micah beside her, three siblings in a row, and though the light wasn’t especially low, he caught Sheila looking at him. He shuffled, tossed his head back, rubbed his hands through his hair, looked out the window. He couldn’t see her in the reflection, so he tilted his head slightly, watched her peripherally. For a while, she watched the screen, watched her children, then settled on him, her head slightly toward the TV, as if nominally pretending to be aware of it.

When Noah came home, Caleb was genuinely relieved. While David helped with the food and Becky set the table, Caleb talked to Noah about the trip, about where they were going.

“We’ve been there before,” Caleb said. “I don’t think you came that time. Raymond invited all of us who could get there.”

“I don’t remember that,” Noah said. He had a glass of water in his hand and smelled of cigarette smoke. He didn’t smoke himself, but his coworkers did and he thought it wise to drink coffee with them after work, or sip iced water in bars if that was where they wanted to go.

“We should go to the island,” Caleb said. “I mean, if it’s possible. I’ve always wanted to camp on that island.”

“We’ll have to get a raft,” Noah said. “I’m not sure I have the time.”

“Micah and I’ll drive out. Just tell us where to go.”

And then they ate dinner.

Not a word between any of them. Halsey seemed starved by the way he kept eating, crunching, his large jaw working like a machine. Rachel stared at her plate, eating like a bird. She seemed vaguely sick. David and Becky ate quietly as well. David didn't tell them what he thought about things, and Becky didn't push the food around on her plate as if landscaping it, nor did she hold her glass or her glass to the light. Micah ate as if he were working on a philosophical problem, his eyes above the light over the table one moment, then down, his chin nearly against his chest. Noah sagged at the table, leaned back, even, towards the end, nodded a little, then jerked upright and glanced around. Sheila sat bolt upright, one hand in her lap, lifting, occasionally, to dab at her mouth. She ate steadily, her forkfuls small, her bites precise. Caleb wanted to ask her if ever in her life her teeth had touched a utensil.

HALSEY, RACHEL AND Caleb leaned against the dumpster, smoking dope. It was past midnight and the dinner that evening, with Noah, had been tense. None of them had spoken about it, but they had ended up in the front yard instead of watching television. They had been looking for Micah, who had made himself scarce. They'd circled out the drive way, followed the road as it sloped down the hill. At the point where it forked, one direction turning up the next hill, the other continuing down, they found a small road leading into a tunnel of darkness: the alley behind the houses where the neighbors kept their dumpsters

“My God,” Halsey said. “It’s like you all hate each other. Noah looks dead tired and pissed off. Sheila seemed all right earlier, but when we sat down, silence. And you, Caleb.”

“Hey,” Caleb said. “I have a policy. Keep my mouth shut.”

“Oh,” Halsey said.

He sat with his back against one end of the dumpster, Rachel in the middle, Caleb at the other end. Halsey was a big man, thick, muscular, tall. He had the kind of mouth that looked as if a permanent smile had been thumbbed into it, and a stoner’s voice, soft, smoky, as if his every thought were a wistful memory.

“I don’t know what it is,” Rachel said. “Tense.”

“Like a mother fucker,” Halsey said.

Caleb started laughing. He doubled over, had trouble breathing.

“What?” Halsey said, and then again when Caleb didn’t stop, “What?”

“Why would a mother fucker be tense?”

Halsey started laughing, then Rachel joined in. When they stopped, they passed the joint around again.

“I noticed it,” Rachel said. “Doesn’t seem like Noah.”

“It’s Sheila,” Caleb said. “She hates me.”

“Come on,” Rachel said. “How can that be? She doesn’t even *know* you. It’s been ten years since the wedding.”

“You mean you’ve never been around her since they got married?” Halsey said.

“Ten years,” Rachel said.

“Maybe she hates me out of loyalty to Noah,” Caleb said.

“Maybe so,” Rachel said.

But that didn’t seem right. There wasn’t a reason for her to hate him. He had only been a kid back then, with a kid’s grudges and misconceptions. She would forgive him that, wouldn’t she? She would realize that Noah was quick to anger, quick to assume others thought he was at fault, was the object of all criticism. It was something else. When she glanced at him, her mouth tight, her eyes wide, her mouth frowning, it was something else.

The fences along the alley were overgrown with the same dark, blue-green shrubs, yellow windows barely visible behind them as they had walked, invisible, now, as they smoked sitting in a row.

“Did you hear that?” Halsey said. “We’re busted.”

They sat still. A rustling in the bushes in front and to the right of them, then a little more, then silence, and then the rustling more pronounced in front of them again.

“Sneaky cops,” Rachel said. “Too sneaky.”

“It’s Sheila,” Caleb said.

“Yeah, right,” Rachel said, giggling.

“There,” Halsey said, holding out his hand, finger extended, the joint’s orange tip leaking sparks. From the darkness near the bottom of the hedge, from the street light beside Noah’s front yard, a silvery blue artificial moon lit two staring, glowing eyes.

“I think it’s a cat,” Caleb said.

“Or a possum,” Rachel said.

“They have those here?” Halsey said. “A possum in California?”

“That’s the name of my next novel,” Caleb said.

The eyes blinked, then turned away. Caleb held his breath, listening.

“God,” Rachel said.

“What?” Halsey said.

“Oh, God,” Rachel said. “I just thought of something.”

“She gets like this,” Halsey explained.

“Like what?” Caleb said.

“Have you ever thought about the distance between things?” Rachel said.

“Never,” Caleb said.

“I might have,” Halsey said.

“Well,” she said. “Think about it.” She pushed herself away from the dumpster, inched along crablike until she sat facing them, cross-legged. Her dark hair hung on either side of her gray face. She held both hands up, looking, to Caleb, like a Hindu dancer. “Well,” she said, “we’re all used to thinking about there being space between two objects, right? You got your earth here, your moon there, and between them nothing. I mean after the atmosphere. So there’s nothing between them but a couple of atoms of hydrogen, maybe, and some spare photons, a little infrared energy, maybe some radio waves, but, you know, not really anything.”

“Right,” Halsey said. “Got you.”

Caleb thought he heard a shuffle down the alley, a footstep or two, maybe a scrape. He peered along the road into the darkness, wondering where the road ended,

who might live down there. He felt a sudden chill, a crinkle along his scalp. There's someone down there, he thought. Someone listening.

"Okay," Rachel said. "So, if space is nothing but nothing, and there is nothing between two objects, then how come they're not next to each other?"

"Oh," Halsey said. "Woah. Jeez."

Caleb cupped his ears, then cupped his eyes, trying to see down the road. A cat mewed somewhere behind them. Wrong direction. He'd heard something more than a cat's step. He was sure of it. Someone was spying on them.

"God," he said.

"No," Halsey said. "That's not it."

"I meant—" Caleb said.

"Wait a minute, Rachel," Halsey said. "What makes you so sure they aren't?"

"Aren't what?" Rachel said.

"Next to each other?" Halsey said.

In the silence, Caleb wanted to stand, leaned forward, glad to get the cold dumpster off his back. Was that another step?

Rachel started laughing. "Touché," she said. "Tou fucking ché." She kept on laughing and Halsey joined her, his voice low and soft and easy, as if his vocal chords had been worn down from long use.

After awhile, Rachel said, "Caleb, what's up? Are you okay?"

"Someone's out there," he said.

"It's the cat," she said.

“No,” he said.

“It’s the pot,” she said. “You know it makes you paranoid. One time I was in this store and—”

“No, it’s not that,” he said. “No. I heard something.”

All three of them turned to look. Nothing.

“Hey!” Micah jumped in front of them, then paused, sniffed. “What are you guys doing out here? I can’t believe you. If Noah found out—”

A low moan somewhere behind them. “What’s that?” Halsey said. “Some strange California pig?” His laugh quickly died. The sound grew, a long, moaning, hum, rising in pitch until it turned into a howl. Caleb stood, looked over the dumpster. He lifted his head, cupped his hands around his mouth, and howled back, a quiet howl.

“I think it’s David,” Rachel said.

“Yeap,” Halsey said.

“Goddamn kids,” Micah said.

Caleb howled again, and was echoed from the house. The distant howling cut off. A door shut. “It’s going to be a fun camping trip,” Caleb said.

“Only you could think so,” Micah said.

“What do you mean?” Caleb said.

“It’s okay,” Halsey said. He put his arms around Rachel, who leaned into him, seemed incapable of standing, in fact. She shuddered, then gasped against Halsey’s chest.

“What’s the matter?” Micah said.

“Are you all right?” Caleb said.

“She gets like this,” Halsey said, “when she smokes. I don’t understand it.”

“Me, either,” Rachel said.

The four of them stood, watched the lights in Noah’s house wink out, the back light, under the deck, wink on. Caleb felt the air thicken around him, press against him like the weight of water. Then he had it. He understood what drew Sheila’s eyes together, her mouth tight, her arms beneath her breasts. Not anger. Fear.

CALEB LEANED AGAINST the Mercedes waiting for Micah. He felt relaxed, a little too relaxed, and slightly foggy, the left over effects of last night’s dope. Noah lived near the top of a hill in a heavily wooded area. The neighborhood was shot through with tall pines, oaks and elms and birches and eucalypti, everything mixed together like a landscaper’s sample case. That morning, the fog had eased in, the clouds had lowered, hiding the tops of trees, their dark trunks, heavy leaves plowing the air like slow moving ships. The air was cooler than the normal Bay Area summer, moved only slightly, the fog thickening here and there like a crowd of old memories passing through.

The last time Caleb had seen this kind of fog, delicate, melancholy, was the last time he had been in the Bay Area, when he had visited Raymond a few months before the disappearance. Soon he’d be back in Portland, under the overcast he loved. Soon he would see Raymond. At his moment, waiting for Micah, waiting for Becky, he was sure of it.

It was midmorning, Friday, all the commuters had gone, including Noah, who had taken the Explorer with him for last minute servicing. The land was as silent as the deep woods, a distant freeway not noise, but a reminder of streams and rivers. He heard, behind him, the door handle turn, the door open, a slight kissing sound as edging moved across the porch, then the shutting door, some footsteps, a pause, a step off the porch.

“This is a great day,” Caleb said.

“It’s nice,” Micah said. “Reminds me of Colorado.”

“The fog?”

“The quiet,” Micah said. “Seems odd, doesn’t it? A neighborhood like this?”

Micah leaned against the car beside Caleb. He wore black boots, black pants, a dark brown leather jacket, mirrored sunglasses. His face was pale and smooth, his mouth slightly down turned. Caleb expected him to pull out a cigarette, to fade into the fog itself, transformed like a Greek myth into a black tree trunk.

“It’s going to be chaos up in Portland,” Micah said. “Are you ready for it?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “No sweat. It’s the camping trip I’m worried about.”

“Sheila?” Micah said.

“You’ve noticed?” Caleb said.

“Crazy world,” Micah said.

Micah pushed himself off the Mercedes, rounded the hood and stood at the passenger door. He tossed Caleb the keys, said, “Let’s go.”

Caleb turned the key, which opened all the locks. Micah got in just as the house’s front door opened again. Becky came out, a scarf around her neck. She wore a short

peasant dress, black shoes. The braids hanging at the back of her head danced as she skipped across the deck toward Caleb.

“Can I go?” she said.

“Don’t see why not,” Caleb said.

She opened the back door to get in. Micah leaned toward Caleb once Caleb sat down and shut his door. “Don’t you think you should ask Sheila?”

“Somehow,” Caleb said, “I get the idea that asking Sheila anything is not a good idea.”

“Daddy said I could go,” Becky said.

“I think you should ask her,” Micah said. “This is not a good idea.”

“What’s your problem?” Caleb said. “We’re going to the store. That’s all.”

As they started down the hill, Becky leaned between the two of them, began to stare at Micah. Caleb watched her in the rear view mirror. Her skin was as white as Micah’s, her lips make-up red. Stray hairs fell from her forehead, traced the hint of freckles on the bridge of her nose.

“She looks just like you,” Caleb said.

“Don’t you think she should be in seat belts?” Micah said.

Becky fell back, pulled on and clicked her seat belt. “I always forget that part,” she said. “Are you guys mad?”

“No,” Caleb said.

Micah leaned against his window, appeared to be asleep, but the way his head pressed against the glass wedged the sunglasses off his face a little and Caleb could see that his eyes were wide open and staring.

They found the Army/Navy store where Noah had said it would be down in an old industrial part of town sandwiched in between an auto body shop and a parts store. The Mercedes, black and shiny, stuck out in the gravel parking lot among Ford trucks and dusty, olive green Malibus. As they walked toward the store front, Becky ran ahead, then turned, blocking Micah's path. She reached toward him, but her hand on his chest, held it there. Micah looked down at her, then up, as patient as a sphinx. Becky kept her palm pressed against Micah's chest where his jacket fell open for what seemed long minutes. Caleb opened the store's door and the faint ring of the bells above it broke the spell. Becky let go and headed into the store. While Caleb examined rafts and sleeping bags, Micah stood near the corner and watched Becky as if he expected her abduction at any moment. Becky walked quickly and surely along the rows, patting piles of long underwear, burying her face in long thick wool p-coats.

When the cashier, an old man in a flannel shirt and pure white hair, rang up the order, Caleb pulled Micah aside. "What's with you?"

"Never mind," Micah said. "Long story."

"Never seen you like this," Caleb said. "When I was a kid, I was always jealous or pissed off or scared or half in love with everything and everyone. You were Even Stephen."

"Even Stephen," Micah said.

“Now you’re skulking around like you’ve got something to hide,” Caleb said.

“You got something to hide?”

“I already told you,” Micah said. “Remember? The other night?”

“I was asleep,” Caleb said. “Something about John? Who’s John?”

“Never mind,” Micah said. “I’d really rather not talk about it. Talking about it just brings it all back.” He walked away, pushed open the door, sent the cow bells clanking again.

“I love that sound,” Becky said. She put her hand on Caleb’s chest. It felt warm and steady. Comfortable.

“What are you doing?” Caleb said.

“I like to feel hearts beating,” she said. “It’s so strange.”

“What’s mine feel like?” he said.

For a minute, she said nothing. The cashier set Noah’s credit card on the counter, along with a receipt and a pen.

“I don’t know,” Becky said, when she withdrew her hand. “I just feel them. It’s just a stage, Mommy says.”

Caleb crouched down, looked Becky in the eyes. She was eight years old. Or nine. She didn’t look at all like Michelle, except the hint of freckles, as if she might turn in to Michelle some day. For a moment, Caleb’s heart beat a little faster, tightened. He caught a glimpse of red behind the line of P-coats. He stood. Hunting vests. Not the same kind of red at all, really. What had he been thinking?

THE NIGHT BEFORE the big trip, Caleb sat on steps between the kitchen and the garage, his back against the cool door. All day he had been listless, uninterested in anything, trying hard to wish he were back in New York, or already in Portland, not having much success evoking any sort of desire one way or another. The garage door was open, Noah's Ford Explorer backed up as close as it could get. Noah seemed happy, humming to himself, brushing the hair out of his eyes. He stood on one side of the garage, looked over the boxes, bags, coolers, tents, and the raft Caleb and Micah had brought back from the Army/Navy store. He started with the tents, four of them, sliding them into the Explorer's trunk area.

Evening had already fallen, the sky outside a deepening blue, the air cooled by gusts of wind, once in a while, fondling the edges of boxes, of clothes in the basket of unwashed laundry. Earlier, Sheila had taken Rachel, Halsey and the children out for some last minute shopping in the Mercedes. They had all gone off laughing and excited, while Caleb watched from the kitchen window, remembering when he had felt that way as a kid: remembering the time they had all gone to the lake, or the time Raymond had taken he and Rachel and Micah to the drive-in before it was torn down. He remembered the laughing, the quality of the light in their father's car when they opened the front door at night, but he couldn't remember the feeling of it, the excitement of stepping outside on the first spring day when the air was perfect, neither too hot, or too cold, when it seemed as if to step outside was to start running.

"Do you believe dreams are significant?" Caleb said.

Noah shoved the raft on top of the boxed tents, then searched around his work bench for any tools he might have forgotten to add to his box.

“Do you think they tell the future, not in a mystical way, but on an intuitional level?”

“More likely,” Noah said. “They’re so vague you can make them fit what you want them to fit.”

“I think you’re right,” Caleb said.

“Why do you ask?” Noah said.

“Had a weird dream the other day, when I had that headache.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Noah rested for a minute against his work bench, then hoisted most of the rest of their supplies in as fast as he could. It became apparent to both of them that they weren’t going to fit everything in, that the sleeping bags took up too much room.

“Why so much stuff?” Caleb said.

“Bring everything, I figure,” Noah said, scratching his head. “I’ll know what not to bring next time by what we don’t use this time.”

“Let everything drop away,” Caleb said, “until what’s left is what you need.”

“Exactly,” Noah said, grinning. “You know, you sound like Raymond when you say things like that, except not nearly the jerk.”

“He was a jerk?”

“It’s been a long time,” Noah said. “Maybe I only just thought he was.”

Something in Noah's voice, the quickness of it, told Caleb that Noah was lying. He wanted more than anything to ask Noah about Raymond, hear stories, thoughts, even if they were negative and unfriendly. But Caleb's own quiet mood, Noah's good mood were something Caleb didn't want to disturb. Not in that way, at least.

"Sheila was in the dream," Caleb said. "I really get the feeling that she doesn't trust me."

Noah stared into the Explorer, scratched his head. "Well," he said. "She was a bit upset when you and Micah took Becky to the store without telling her."

"She doesn't trust us?" Caleb said.

"Something like that," Noah said.

"Really," Caleb said. "I'd like to know. What have I done?"

"It's what you might do," Noah said.

"What does that mean?" Caleb said.

Noah leaned against the Explorer's rear door, rocking the truck.. "Shit," he said. "I'm going to have to re-do this all over again."

"What is she afraid of?" Caleb said. "Tell me, Noah."

"I don't know," Noah said. Caleb waited for Noah to look him in the eye, but he wouldn't. He kept his head down, began to unload. "It's a good thing we're taking two cars. Maybe I can fit some of this stuff in the Mercedes."

"You know, don't you," Caleb said. "I can tell. You're lying through your teeth."

Noah looked at him, his face expressionless, and then he lunged at Caleb, grabbed him by the shirt, twisted until Caleb was nearly choking. “I’ve just heard for the last goddamn time what you think I’m thinking. The last goddamn time.”

“Okay,” Caleb said. “Christ.”

“Just let it all go,” Noah said. “And whatever’s going on with Sheila, it’s no business of yours. Just assume that.”

“But,” Caleb started.

“I don’t want to hear another word,” he let go of Caleb. “Do we understand each other?”

“Yes,” Caleb said.

“All right, then,” Noah said. “Help me unload this monster. We’re going to start over.”

“Maybe if we unroll the sleeping bags,” Caleb said. “Drape them over the tent boxes.”

“Now *that’s* a good idea,” Noah said, as happily efficient as he had been angry the moment before. Caleb was scared and curious. The streetlight above the house winked on. A wind pushed into the garage, touched Caleb’s burning cheek.

AT FOUR IN the morning Caleb opened his eyes. The room was black, just a hint of pale street light from the tops of the curtains, enough to highlight the ceiling, a giant, faintly glowing gray pool hanging over him. He got up, pulled on jeans and a heavy flannel shirt, headed for the stairs, climbing as softly as possible until he found himself facing

Noah's big screen television. For a moment he was dizzy, disoriented. He'd been looking for the yellow strip of light.

He sat down on the couch, put his feet on the coffee table, stared at the dark ceiling until it took shape, the surface of another diving pool. The house was filled with them.

It was four in the morning. Seven in New York. He found the cordless phone already in his hand, and as he dialed, he began to feel dread, the sense that he was being pulled back or pulled down, that a man wiser than himself wouldn't call.

Michelle answered on the fifth ring. "Hello?"

He loved the sound of her voice, quiet as if hellos were the first word she had spoken since he left, but also assured. No surprise, no anticipation or worry. A sense of confidence and purpose, and behind that, silence. No music, no other voices, no presence.

"Caleb, is that you?" she said again.

"Hi," Caleb said. "It's not too early?"

"No."

"Did you water my plant?"

"Got it right here. It's beautiful."

"You don't go to my apartment anymore?"

"No," she said. "Should I? You don't own anything. And that woman."

"That woman?"

"The singer."

“Oh.”

The silence behind Michelle grew into the phone, stretched through the wire, settled in the folds of his ear.

“How are things?” she finally said. “How’s your family?”

“Are you okay?” Caleb said. “Do you miss me?”

“Of course I do,” she said.

“You don’t seem like it,” he said.

“What am I supposed to do,” Michelle said. “Squeal?”

They laughed. He leaned back on the couch, his head resting on the thin cushion. Not a single ray of light entered the room. The windows didn’t face the street, and in the middle of the night, not a porch light on at the neighbors, not a moon in the sky, nothing. The air was warm, comfortable. Caleb felt as if he had just had a cup of coffee after a good night’s sleep.

“Rachel smokes dope because her boyfriend does,” Caleb said. “He’s okay, though. I like him. Micah won’t talk to anyone and is scared of Noah’s children. I had a headache a day or so ago and he seemed to think I was going to die. The kids are great. Becky’s a little witchdoctor, and David desperately wants to be taken seriously.”

“They all sound like you,” Michelle said.

Caleb sat up. “What do you mean?”

“If someone described a person like that,” she said, “and I had to guess, I’d guess it was you.”

“I’m not scared of children,” Caleb said. “And I don’t smoke dope. Not as a rule, anyway.”

“Okay,” Michelle said. “I take it back.”

Caleb tried to listen to the silence behind Michelle, heard only the creaking of muscles in his jaw. He wanted to look at something. The lamp beside him was a little darker than the distance behind it, but only a little. The giant rectangle over his head, half in and half out of his imagination, loomed monolithically.

“The strange thing,” Caleb said, “is that I get along with Noah. We’re opposites, and we can barely talk to each other. He misunderstands everything I say, you know? But I feel like I understand him.”

“He’s your brother,” Michelle said.

Caleb heard her moving around: the shifting-cloth-sound of the head set between her ear and shoulder, the clash of a spoon in a cereal bowl.

“And then there’s Noah’s wife,” Caleb said.

“The pillar of salt?” Michelle said.

“That’s Lot’s wife,” Caleb said. “Though the shoe fits. She’s scared of me. Or hates me. There’s something cruel and murderous in her, you know?”

“You’re imagining things,” Michelle said. “I never would have thought you were paranoid.” Her laughed was tinged with echo. Was she in the bathroom?

“I don’t think so,” Caleb said. “I’m going to pretend nothing’s wrong. I have to admit, I feel a little gross around her. Kind of disgusting. Like I’m the idiot relative who shows up after years under a bridge, stinking of bodies, rancid beer and old smoke.”

Michelle laughed again.

“I’m starting to think this whole thing wasn’t a good idea,” Caleb said. “New York is a good idea. *You* are a good idea. Even that goddamn pesky miracle plant is a good idea. But this wedding, this wedding is not a good idea. Promise me that when we get married, we’ll run away. We’ll come back, have a party and leave halfway through.”

“Okay,” she said. “I promise.”

For a long time, they said nothing.

“Did you mean what you said?” Michelle finally said.

“What?” he said.

“You know,” she said.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“About the wedding. About getting married.”

“Oh,” he said. “If we get married, I want to avoid the ceremony. I don’t want my family to show up. At least I don’t want *her* to show up.”

Michelle was silent. No static or cloth or dishes, only the hollow sound of his own movement, his own breath transmitted across the country and back again.

“No,” she said. “I mean, does this mean you want to get married?”

“Of course,” he said. His heart pounded. “I mean, sometime, you know? When I get back. You know, maybe we can think about it.” He didn’t mean it at all, hadn’t meant it at all, but for a moment, when Michelle finally breathed on the other end, he entertained the idea, the two of them living in the same place twenty-four hours a day. She had already lived through one of his moods, stuck with him for no reason he could

understand. She had her moods too, all that staring. He loved her. He wanted to be next to her.

“You’re going to be at the wedding, right?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “I bought my ticket. No problem.”

“Good,” he said. “A couple of weeks. Right?”

“Right,” she said.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you,” she said.

He hung up. He turned on the light, stared at the white ceiling, the dark green carpet, flawless and immaculate, at the slate-blue fireplace, at the glass covered clock on the mantelpiece, as unmoving as a cactus. The house was silent, seemed as if it had always been silent.

And there it was again.

That presence.

He leaned forward on the couch, stared down the long hall through the dining room into the kitchen. Someone was there, someone watching him. He could just make out a green gleam on a bracelet, or a watch, a reflection of the microwave oven’s clock. He stared at his feet, let his bangs fall forward, turned his head just barely, and stared until the person moved.

Sheila.

CHAPTER 5

IN THE WATER, Caleb and Micah, on air filled rafts, sipped sickening root beer (in Caleb's estimation, though he sipped anyway) and talked as the low soft waves undulated beneath them, as the houseboats lurched by on steel pontoons.

"I got the idea for the novel," Micah said, "from real life."

"I've heard of that plot before," Caleb said. "Seen it. Kid's in a coma. Parents flutter and wring their hands while he, in some inner landscape, battles the forces of darkness."

"Did I say anything about the plot?" Micah said. "Who cares about the plot?"

"Oh," Caleb said. "Okay."

They were between the island and the shore. Behind them, the RVs stood guard, their occupants sitting under blue tarps, beers in hand, tinny radios nattering from beneath steering wheels and rickety chairs. In front, the island. A pile of red dirt sliding into the green lake, a tumbled, gravel path up to a top crowned in dull, dark green scrub out of which shot a seven straight pines, there since the lake filled fifty years before.

Becky stood by the shore in a blue-and-white striped one piece swimsuit. She seemed smaller than she was, and younger, holding up a spatula, waving it, plunging it into the slightly sandy mud where Micah and Caleb, only minutes before, had shoved off. David had just been there, had waved to them, tramped around the island, "exploring," he

had shouted. He'd followed the shore as it climbed into a small cliff of rock and clumped dirt dripping over an undercut.

"I don't know if you remember my girlfriend," Micah said. "My last girlfriend. Lisa."

"Lisa," Caleb said. "You're right. I don't remember."

"She was older than I was. Several years older."

"No bells," Caleb said. He dunked the root beer into the lake, drowned it, let the water and soda mix into nothingness.

"She had a kid," Micah said. "A little boy."

Caleb let go of the can, felt it slip from his fingers. He waited to see it bob to the surface. It didn't. "John?" he said. "Was that the John you were talking about when I was sick?"

"Yeah," Micah said. "That's the kid. He's where I got the idea."

The kid was autistic, Micah told Caleb, or at least that's what Lisa had told him, though there was never a hint of a medical diagnosis, nor references to doctors, or ongoing treatment. "I think she liked him the way he was," Micah said. "She wanted him like that. Quiet. Speaking only once in a while." He would sit for hours in his room, or at the table, or in the living room floor moving shapes around, not like Rachel did when she was a kid, as if he were figuring something out, but just for the sake of moving them. Micah watched him for hours after he moved in with Lisa during his Senior year of college. "Better than TV," Micah said. "I tried to figure out what he was doing. I'd get behind on assignments." The kid was fascinated by space, as far as Micah

could tell. He was only five and six, but he'd arrange blocks, stuffed animals, an entire set of dishes in a pattern: nothing recognizable, not a star or square, not a spiral or something Celtic. In fact, Micah admitted, he wasn't sure it was a pattern at all, though he felt he was always just about to figure out what it represented.

"I began to invent reasons," Micah said. "And they ended up in the novel. He was designing a device. He was speaking in some trans-dimensional language. He was communicating with someone, something."

"I'd like to meet this kid," Caleb said. He moved forward, let his legs sink into the lake, his head and back lift like a drawbridge. He watched Micah as Micah talked, his mirrored sunglasses reflecting the too-bright sun, tiny drops of water like fire in his chest and arms, thrown there as he gestured. Becky was still on the shore, flicking the water with her spatula, the slaps like a clock ticking.

"It's amazing," Micah said. "She doesn't like the water. She knows how to swim. She's not afraid of it. She just doesn't like it."

"Kids," Caleb said.

At first he'd been interested in the boy because he was curious, Micah continued. That was all there was to it. No real emotion. But something inside him kept giving way. Maybe it was the mystery. John would look at him sometimes, ask him to pass the ketchup, or why light bulbs gave off light. "I'd answer the questions," Micah said. "He wouldn't look at me. He'd fiddle with what was in front of him. I'd explain in as much detail as I could, as if I were explaining it to you, the grownup you. When I was done, he'd nod." Lisa had told Micah that John had asked her questions from time to time,

random questions, and she'd answer, too, but she was sure he didn't understand. Micah was convinced John wanted to hear the sounds of speech. That he was arranging them in his mind, like he did the objects on the floor, on tables, beds, counters and porches. "And so I started to love that kid like you wouldn't believe," Micah said. "I don't think if I had ten children I'd love any of them or all of them together as much as John. And then he died."

"He what?" Caleb said. He'd been watching Becky. She was knee deep in the water. Her swimsuit came fringed with a little skirt, striped and ruffled, and she held it up daintily so it wouldn't get wet.

"Dead," Micah said. "Just like that."

Becky looked toward them, waved her spatula. Caleb waved back.

"Is that Becky still?" Micah said. He didn't lift his head. He sprinkled some water on his chest, smoothed back his hair. "And odd child. Kind of like John. A lot like John."

They'd been at the aquarium in Golden Gate Park the day John died, watching the fish swim in a giant, circular tank. Mantas and tuna and long snaky eels, the water swirling, drawing with it streamers of kelp, like flags in a mythical medieval fair. John had been entranced, his eyes wide, his body slowly turning with the fish. Micah had hold of his hand while Lisa went to use the bathroom. "I wasn't even trying to figure out what he was seeing," Micah said. The fish, the blue water, those fronds swaying: all too beautiful to wonder about, if that's possible. Then I realized that John was looking at me. I glanced down. His eyes, wide and black, stared at me. I could feel the pressure of his

hand, so I squeezed a little harder. He looked down at his shoes, back again at me. He closed his eyes. He went limp. I let him go. I don't know, I thought maybe he wanted to get closer to the glass, closer to the fish endlessly swimming, but instead, he just fell, like loose clothes, and there he lay. I felt his neck. I don't know why I did. It's what they do on TV. And then I heard a gasp, a slight whimper, and I thought he was okay, but it was Lisa. She'd come into the room. She'd found him."

"Dead." Caleb said.

"Dead," Micah said. "And it sounds stupid to say it now, but that's why I went to Colorado. Lisa blamed me. Not really, you know, but deep down. I was there when it happened, I was with him his last moment. She couldn't forgive me."

"So you went to Colorado to hide?" Caleb said.

"Yes."

"You didn't want to see children again?"

"Close enough."

"That does sound dumb," Caleb said.

"Especially when you say it out loud," Micah said. "But it didn't feel dumb. Had to be done."

"Wow," Caleb said.

He glanced again at the shore. Becky wasn't there. He felt a sudden shiver, the warm air against his still damp back. He imagined her floating in the murky green dark, not gliding, not diving, floating, her arms outstretched, her hair fanned against the sunny surface.

“Awful,” Caleb said. “Dumb or not, I don’t blame you. If I had to get out, I’d go to Wyoming, though. A huge, endless plane. A tree stump here, an old building there.”

“I hear you,” Micah said. “So my book, it’s about John. Only there’s a difference.”

Just then a hand, small, pudgy, wrinkled from the water, reached up from beneath Micah’s raft, touched his side, startling him into the water. Caleb glanced at the camp ground. Rachel? Halsey? The hand was too small. David?

A voice squealed, then coughed. Micah surfaced, grabbed on to the raft just moments before Becky did.

“A little girl tipped your raft?” Caleb said.

“She startled me,” Micah said. He whipped his head back, sent glittering drops across the water.

“Your sunglasses,” Caleb said. “Where are they?”

“Damn,” Micah said. He looked at Becky, who clung to his raft as if she’d spent months in the ocean. “Here.” Micah pulled her up, set her on the raft, then climbed up behind her. They looked like two Indians in a sinking canoe. Micah laughed, kept on laughing and Becky joined in. Caleb paddled closer. He didn’t see the sunglasses anywhere and wondered why Micah didn’t care. He hadn’t gone a minute without them in the daylight since he’d gotten off the plane in San Francisco.

“Micah,” he said as they paddled slowly toward the island. “In your novel, what was the difference? What did you change about John?”

Micah shrugged. “I let him live, of course.”

“WE SHOULD HAVE invited them along,” Halsey said. “It’ll seem like we’re ditching ‘em.”

“We’re not,” Caleb said. “Noah said it was okay. It *is* okay. They can’t leave the kids sleeping alone, can they?”

“No,” Rachel said. “They can’t.”

“I feel like we’re in the Army,” Micah said. “D-day.”

It was after midnight, the stars flung into clumps and corners in the black sky. The four of them sat precariously on the fat edges of the raft. Rachel, the lightest, manned the front with a short paddle, Halsey, the heaviest, in back with the long paddle. “Maybe the French and Indian War,” Halsey said. With a final push, the craft nudged the shore to one side of the RV’s.

“Watch out,” Micah said. “Those bunkers are loaded.”

“Not half as loaded as we’ll be,” Halsey said.

They splashed in the water as they pulled the raft up. A yellow light inside the third RV from the far end winked on.

“Freeze,” Caleb said.

They froze. Rachel began to giggle. Halsey followed suit, then Micah. Caleb shushed them, and when that didn’t work, crouched low, fanned his arm out as if directing his advanced scouts, and across the RV line they went, ducking, darting, laughing, until they reached the parking lot. They crossed it at a full run, circled the unlit lamp post once, kept on across until they reached a group of trees around a picnic table and benches. They sat for a while, panting.

“We forgot the boat,” Rachel said.

“To hell with the boat,” Halsey said.

“We forgot the water,” Caleb said.

“To hell with water,” Halsey said.

“We forgot the weed,” Micah said.

“Oh no we didn’t,” Halsey said. “No we didn’t indeed.” He pulled out a bag, crinkled it enticingly, produced a pipe, a lighter. He began the loading, the tamping. “Too dark to screen out seeds,” he said. “I hope you all don’t mind.” The lighter lit his face, pink and orange around the silver pipe at his mouth. The pipe went round several times. They talked but couldn’t finish their sentences.

“Remember,” Halsey said. “There’s no space between one thing and another.”

Rachel laughed. “I remember,” she said. “How could I forget?” She leaned over the table toward Caleb. “Hey you,” she said. “Quit leaning against me!” She burst into fresh laughter and they all followed along until, as if struck by God, the parking light snapped on. Within seconds, thousands of white bugs swarmed the blue-white bulb, their flickering wings in oscillating harmony with the lamp’s electric buzz.

The four of them watched for a while, saying nothing.

“Beautiful,” Caleb said.

“I think so,” Rachel said. There was a catch in her voice.

“She’s scared of me,” Caleb said. “Sheila. She thinks I’m going to get her alone and run her through with a butcher knife.”

“Don’t you mean chop her?” Halsey said.

“It’s true,” Caleb said. “Try and deny it!”

“I won’t deny it,” Halsey said. “I think it’s funny.”

“I don’t think it’s funny,” Micah said. “And I don’t deny it either. I can’t say that I was ever friendlier to Noah than Caleb was. Maybe worse. But she’s okay with me.”

“I’ll say,” Caleb said. “Even David doesn’t talk to me much anymore. It’s Uncle Micah this and Uncle Micah that.”

“Are you jealous?” Rachel said.

“No,” Caleb said.

“I bet you’re jealous,” Rachel said.

“Not at all.”

Rachel leaned against Halsey, who put the pipe and lighter away, put his arms around her. “I know what it is,” Rachel said, her voice quiet, as if Halsey’s arms had lulled her into a trance. “You think that it’s possible for us all to get along. And we do, mostly. Not a lot of recrimination here, eh? Not a lot at all. Almost none. All of us our private little problems, little seeds we like to tongue into pearls. That’s what we do. But Sheila, and Noah, too, wear their pearls on their sleeves, and you don’t like that. You want to get *beyond* it. That’s what you want.”

Micah and Caleb stared at Rachel as she mumbled on, then looked above her head at the bugs orbiting the blue-white light, burning themselves out in some last frantic burst, the placid sun gone tight, intense—desperate.

“But we all know that you can’t get *beyond* anything,” Rachel said. “That this is all we have, and she doesn’t like you. Simple as that. Weird as that. Who doesn’t like

Caleb? Hannah liked him the best. Leah loves him. And Raymond, of course, Raymond. It's all his fault, really. Groomed him to be some prophet or other."

Caleb leaned across the table, touched Rachel's knee. "Is that true?" he said. "I thought it was something like that. I've *got* to meet him again. If it wasn't for him. . . ." As the bugs continued to dance, the crowd growing thicker, more frenzied, Caleb felt a sudden need to leave these people. He was having a good time, except for Sheila. He liked them. They made him laugh, made him want to be around them and keep being around them. Even Halsey, so different, big and dopey, but witty, too, and happy and comfortable. He liked that. Halsey was like Raymond sometimes was. The Raymond who could be charmed by an ant on the window sill, by the place where a dam grips rock. And Micah, who had found his muse in the death of a boy, calm, Even-Stephen Micah, that dark something inside. He was like Michelle in that way. And Rachel, what could he say? She seemed scared most of the time, deep down scared, her voice quavering, her manner nervous, her intellect too huge to come out in mere words. Only numbers for her. He liked her the best out of all of them, almost as much as Raymond, though that was impossible. Raymond was beyond liking, beyond a favorite. Raymond was what Caleb wanted to be, though he had no idea what that was. But everything he saw about these people, even Michelle, was any of it true? Would he see these things if he overheard them in a restaurant, passed them at a rest stop?

"If it wasn't for him, what?" Micah said.

"I'd be happy," Caleb said. "I'd know."

“Know what?” Halsey said. He stroked Rachel’s hair as he spoke. She seemed asleep.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Caleb said.

“Christ,” Rachel said. “Can the mysterious crap, Caleb. You’re not Raymond.” For a moment, no one said a thing. Rachel hadn’t moved. Then the parking light winked off and a silence descended and they heard Rachel crying, small heaves against Halsey.

“I’m sorry, Rachel,” Caleb said.

“No,” Halsey said. “Don’t worry. She gets like this when she smokes.”

Micah touched Caleb on the shoulder, jerked his head back. Together, they began to cross the parking lot. After a moment, they could no longer see the picnic table. Under their feet, thousands of bugs lay stunned, twitching. Micah picked one up, set it on his palm, a cross between a grasshopper, a beetle: they couldn’t tell which.

“Gotta take a piss,” Caleb said. “Hold on.”

He continued across the parking lot toward the RV’s, then circled back to the picnic table, squatted, listened to Halsey’s comfortable voice, Rachel’s weeping.

“It’s okay,” Halsey said. “You don’t have to. It’s all right. I understand.”

“I just can’t,” she said. “I’ve tried and tried, but I haven’t been able to see it in months. The shape is gone. Since I met you. It’s gone.”

“It’ll come back,” Halsey said. “Vitamins. We’ll get you up and running.”

“And I’m sad all the time,” she said. “Exhausted.”

“It’s okay,” Halsey said. “I’ll toss the pipe in the lake. We’ll make a ceremony of it. That’ll be the end of it.”

“I didn’t mean for you to—”

“We’re in this together,” Halsey said. “Always.”

“Okay,” Rachel said.

When Caleb found his way back to Micah, his eyes had adjusted. They waited next to the light pole, the RV’s arrayed before them like a dike against the encroaching sea.

“What did you hear?” Micah said.

“She can’t see the shape anymore,” Caleb said.

“Oh,” Micah said.

“Do you know what that means?” Caleb said.

“Nope,” Micah said. “Not at all.”

Caleb leaned against the pole, thought about Noah’s family on the island, David and Becky sleeping, storing memories against adulthood. Would they puzzle over them in the future? A sadness fell over him thinking of Sheila’s fear and anger, Rachel’s near-silent heaves. He had a vision of himself, or rather, of his absence—of David grown-up, a skyscraper lawyer telling his secretary over brandy about his barely remembered Uncle Caleb, the one who left one evening after a wedding and never came back. And in David’s mind, Caleb thought, there wouldn’t be just him, there would be another, and somewhere behind the two, a shadowy third, and on and on, a receding chain of islands known only to birds, to white beetle-hoppers in the throes of ecstasy.

THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR hours changed everything. They began innocently enough, wonderful, in fact, with the rising of the sun, the cooking of breakfast, Noah playfully pouring cross-shaped pancakes, squares and circles and triangles while David good-naturedly lectured him on what was proper, and Becky giggled, and Caleb and Halsey and Rachel and Micah waited contented and starving as Sheila set the picnic bench with a white cloth, metal dishes, squeeze-bottle maple syrup.

They ate. They lounged. They went down to the water, watched the folks beside their RV's chase dogs, light stoves, cook, eat, shade their eyes against the sun. David took them to the other side of the island where they watched the house boats plow slowly along the lake's snaky arm, heading for the open waters beside the dam, invisible miles to the south and west. From there, Caleb pointed out a campsite, where a large family, larger than theirs, by the look of it, washed dishes on the still shady shore. With Sheila standing behind them, Caleb pointed out to David and Becky that he and all their uncles and aunts and grandparents had camped there once, and how he had loved to float in the lake, hardly a houseboat to be seen, back then.

Halsey said, "Time for a hike," and they raced up the hill, the children first, the adults second, Noah and Sheila slowly afterwards, practicing, it seemed to Caleb, for stable, sedate middle age.

Halsey, Micah, Becky and David crowded the rubber raft, carrying lunch and towels and changes of clothes and off they paddled, skipping the parking lot for somewhere downstream, where the campgrounds followed, for a short distance, a stubby runoff stream.

Rachel and Caleb insisted that Noah and Sheila take a break and commenced to clean the dishes, scrape the pans, re-wrap the butter and batter, sorting and clattering like a couple of caterers learning the ropes. Noah and Sheila sat on two folding chairs at the campsite's edge where the ground broke into the descending path. The sun was just so that the scraggly trees beside them provided some shade, but already, an hour or so before noon, the day was hot, and all had agreed before the hikers left that it would keep on getting hotter.

When she had dried the last dish Caleb washed, Rachel said, "You seem happy."

"I was about to say the same about you," Caleb said.

"What's up?"

"Was thinking that I'd be talking to Raymond, soon," Caleb said. "I can't wait."

"Really, Caleb," Rachel said. "You're like a little kid with all that."

They sat together on the bench, also just under the shade line. Noah leaned back in his chair, twisted around to face them. "You know," he said. "That's the one thing I remember about you Caleb. Following Raymond like a puppy dog. Sick."

"Sick?" Caleb said.

"Come on," Rachel said. "Everyone needs a hero."

"Maybe," Noah said. "But it'd be nice if you worshipped someone heroic."

"I don't worship him," Caleb said. "Give me a little credit. Besides, what's wrong with Raymond? Why *couldn't* he be a hero? He set out on his own. He took the world on his own terms."

“So does your average insane man,” Noah said. He picked up his chair, turned it toward Caleb and Rachel. Sheila remained facing the path, the water, the RV’s along the far shore.

“You’re grossing me out,” Rachel said. “Both of you.”

“Are you saying you’re not excited about seeing him?” Caleb said.

“What I don’t understand,” Noah said, “is where you get this idea that he’s going to show up, that’s he’s not dead or permanently gone.”

The sun had moved to the center of the sky. No shade on the picnic table, or where Noah and Sheila sat like reigning monarchs. He knew that he was going to see Raymond soon because his mother had said something, hinted at something. She might have said it because she knew it would make him come home, but the odd thing, the smack of truth, was that she’d involved Hannah. Hannah and Caleb’s mother had never really gotten along, not closely, anyway, not with any of her husband’s previous children. It wouldn’t have occurred to her to bring up Hannah, to use her in a lie.

The sun’s heat poured into him, beginning on his head, dripping down like melting wax. Sheila stood, folded her chair, turned to look at them. They were all standing. Too hot to stand still, too hot not to. Caleb noticed something different about the set of her mouth. Sympathetic, perhaps, her lips slightly apart, as if she were about to speak. He remembered that not an hour before he had told David and Becky the story of the last time he’d been to Lake Shasta. Maybe she’d heard something in his voice. Maybe she recognized something in him.

As if on cue, they all began to move, Noah and Sheila putting the chairs in their tent, Rachel going into hers to change into a swimsuit.

“I guess it’s stupid to think in those terms,” he said. “I just want to see him again, you know? Get to know him, as an adult, I guess.” What he didn’t say was that if his own sense of Noah, and of how they connected and got along, was so much better now after time had gone by, how would it be with Raymond? All those puzzles, the cave, especially, and that last moment, out in the cold night, on the cold street, not even the sound of Raymond’s car lingering along the gutters or the neighborhood porches.

Sheila pulled off her glasses, wiped her forehead. “I guess it’s true,” she said. “Despite what he did to you, it’s natural you’d crave his respect, his love.”

“What he did to me?” Caleb said.

Noah touched Sheila’s arm.

“You mean up in that cave?” Caleb said. “Is that what you mean? Why is that so terrible? Has anything like that happened to you? I had a vision up there, for Christ’s sake.”

Sheila stared. Noah looked away. Rachel came out of her tent dressed in a one-piece swim suit, a towel over her shoulder.

“What?” she said.

“I had no idea,” Sheila said.

“Sh,” Noah said.

“I didn’t think anyone knew,” Caleb said. “You don’t just walk into the house the day after your thirteenth birthday and say that you’ve had a vision.”

“You had a vision?” Rachel said. She laughed, moved toward the path, bumped Caleb as she passed him, whispered, “Come on, let’s cool off.”

Caleb pulled a towel out of the tent he shared with Micah, paused at the head of the path. Rachel was already half way down. Sheila still watched him. Noah crawled into his tent, mumbled something about the wisdom of sleeping during the heat of the day.

“It was half a vision,” Caleb said. “I’m ready for the other half. Wouldn’t you be?”

Sheila nodded. It seemed, to Caleb, the first honest gesture between them.

WHEN THE HIKERS had returned, and the meat had been barbecued, the drinks cooled and consumed, the day’s earlier mood dissipated into something cooler, exhausted. David and Becky poked white spots into dark sunburns, wincing in tired delight. Halsey and Rachel grouched at each other—withdrawals, Caleb assumed. Micah lapsed into reserve, as if, in his mind, he were once again between the granite shoulders of his Colorado mountain, or maybe in that circular tank, the fish moving and never moving.

Caleb had gone for a walk by the shore, and, a few moments later, found Rachel there. They had skipped rocks, and Rachel told Caleb that she had to admit that she wasn’t looking forward to Raymond. He had creeped her out, once or twice. Normally, this wouldn’t have mattered so much. Caleb assumed that when people spoke about Raymond, they were speaking about themselves, revealing jealousies or hopes, regrets or desires, that in the end, if they spoke negatively about Raymond, they simply applied a

cynicism not at all warranted. But something in the sound of Rachel's voice as she skipped rocks into the lake, something akin to the soft weeping he'd heard the night before, set up a tremor in Caleb, make him begin to suspect that something was wrong, with him, with his family, and that the wrongness was Raymond, that if anything, everyone who had once known him had judged him too generously.

When Caleb and Rachel returned, they found that the campsite had grown sedate, the children already asleep, Micah reading, Noah, Sheila and Halsey playing hearts, flicking down cards in a slow waltz—two of clubs, ace, king—ten of hearts, nine, three. Caleb leaned against a gnarly barked old pine, felt his body slump as his heart raced. He longed to be back in his tiny apartment, the yellow early morning light, the radiator's hiss, the woman next door humming like an old blues singer banking the crowd down low, getting them ready. He couldn't shake the apprehension, felt as if he'd done something horrible, a crime, perhaps, and everyone knew about it, were ashamed of him yet respectful of his burden. Why had Sheila pitied him? She felt sorry for him, now, he was sure. She had worked through her fear. She had worked through her anger. What had caused them?

The card players plucked their three-beat rhythm around a white gas lamp, the netting impossibly white. Micah, in a folding chair, read by their light, while Rachel, near her tent, read a textbook, her face and the pages incandescent yellow. Caleb was convinced they shared a secret. All of them. He longed for Michelle, her secrets secret even from herself, his from himself. He loved her unknowing self. The weight was too much. He wanted to play cards, couldn't make himself get up. Micah kept glancing at

the path down to the lake. He wanted to move. He was restless. Caleb could feel it in himself as well. It was too hot, like thick, hot cotton filling the spaces between them. Halsey was right: they were all next to each other. He wanted to be closer, farther away. The sense of dread pressed him down, urged him on.

He was rescued by the bugs. The beetle-hoppers had discovered the lamp, began to pester the card players. Micah closed his book to watch. Rachel shut her tent's front flap. Halsey, having smacked his neck and brushed his legs repeatedly, stood, said in a short, percussive breath, "Enough!"

Noah turned out the light.

The oppression left Caleb. The dark was good. No one could see him. He could hardly see the others.

"And I was winning, damn it!" Noah said, laughing. "I bet you called in the bugs, eh? A clever rearguard action."

Halsey laughed, and so did Sheila. Caleb heard movement. His eyes began to adjust, so he closed them. He heard glasses clinking, shuffling, the benches groaning beneath bodies.

"Caleb?" Rachel said. "Join us?"

Caleb pulled himself up, sat at the end of the table, Micah on one side, Rachel on the other, Noah at the far end. The stars, thick in the sky, the faint glimmer of the parking lot light, the row of pale RV windows was enough for Caleb to see the faces of the others. He didn't want to see their faces. The heaviness came back. He wanted to remain quiet, to borrow Noah's cell phone, to paddle to the resort in the next cove and

call Michelle. She'd be sleeping, by now, or maybe watching something on television. Reading a book. She'd be under her white bedspread, her legs drawn up, her head on two pillows, her hair piled behind her. The tiny night lamp would light her face, the edge of her arm as she turned pages, the curve of her covered thigh, her knees, her feet in perpetual motion. Micah pressed something into Caleb's hand. A tiny glass. Whiskey.

"Good for what ails you," Micah said.

"What do you mean by that?" Caleb said. "Am I ailing?"

"Oh come on," Rachel said. "Just an expression."

"Right," Caleb said. "Just an expression." He sipped the whiskey, then drank it down, let it burn his throat, water his eyes. Micah fumbled for his glass, poured him another. The others were drinking too, and soon they were laughing, though Caleb didn't know at what. He couldn't pay attention. He was thinking again of the street outside his parents' home, of the cave, of Raymond touching his knee, sending him into an incomprehensible vision, and of the oak tree, nearly dead but impossibly more alive than all of them there, than the island around them, the lake, the world.

"When was the last time you saw Raymond?" he said. He hadn't meant to say it. He hadn't said it to anyone in particular.

"Palo Alto," Micah said. "He came to see me out of the blue." His voice was quiet, Halsey soft. He'd been living off campus and between classes spent his time with Lisa, or writing scene after scene of science fiction with no real intention of using them, publishing them, and then one night, it was a hot night, Raymond had come by carrying a fist of red ball point pens. He handed them to Micah and said, "Read me something."

“And so I read him something,” Micah said. “It was awful. I remember the next day, after he’d gone, thinking how shallow I was writing space opera when there were people like him in the world.”

“Jesus,” Noah said.

“Weird,” Rachel said. “Those red pens. He brought me a bunch of straws the last time I saw him. Boxes. Thousands. We spent all night building bigger and bigger sculptures out of them, linking them together, hanging them from the ceiling, arranging lights and spinning them. I never thought of it before now, but I wonder if that was some sort of parting gift?”

“The prize behind door number three,” Noah said.

“He sounds creative,” Halsey said. “What happened to him?”

“We don’t know,” Micah said. “The family mystery.”

“The family—” Noah said.

“Sh,” Sheila said.

Glasses clinked near Noah’s end of the table.

“What about you, Caleb?” Halsey said. “What did he give you before he left?”

Caleb thought about the yellow strip beneath his father’s door, the conversation on the stairs, his own anger and frustration, that long, low horn on the river. “Nothing,” he said. “Not a thing.”

A SILENCE FELL around them. Somewhere out on the lake, a houseboat sputtered, and from shore, a voice called out, "Freeway! Freeway! Get back here this instant. Freeway!"

"Well," Noah finally said. "Let's call it a night on conversation about Raymond. Let the boogey man rest."

"Come on," Rachel said. "Cut loose a little, Noah."

"Yeah," Micah said.

Noah stood. "Look," he said. "You people just don't know. You don't know a thing. Especially you, Caleb. You're the one who doesn't know the most." He lurched forward. Sheila pushed him back, steadied him. "You think you've got it all worked out, but there's a whole lot more went on back then. Have you ever considered that maybe Raymond was forced to leave? That maybe he didn't want to but it was either that, or" Noah paused, seemed, for almost a full minute, about to say something.

"Or what?" Caleb said. The alcohol had warmed him, and the heat was still thick, but he shivered, trembled where he sat. Raymond was a serial killer, he thought. A child molester, a thief, a schizophrenic, a murderer, a drug trafficker, a revolutionary, a spy, a traitor. He was in prison. In exile. In a government laboratory. An insane asylum. None of these seemed to match Noah's rage. This was something, somehow, personal. Something that offended Noah to the core.

"What?" Caleb repeated.

"Never mind," Noah said. "Never you goddamn mind." He stumbled back, headed, with Sheila's help, to the tent.

CALEB WOKE UP in the middle of the night, his head spongy, just the hint of hangover lurking in the corners, and beyond that, in the attic, a tremor of that deeper pain he'd suffered his first full day at Noah's. Micah breathed heavily beside him. Outside, something rustled in the underbrush. Halsey or Rachel in the next tent sighed, turned over. Caleb knew exactly what time it was. Five in the morning. He could tell by the feel of the air, the sound of the silence. In New York, his hour had been earlier, in Portland, earlier still. Now, five o'clock.

He sat up.

For a moment, the tent spun, red blood veins shot through the air, and then the dread returned in full force, sending his heart into overdrive, his muscles into paralysis. He'd started to form an idea out of the way Sheila was so nervous, so scared around him when he was with the children, the way she had talked about his need to seek approval from Raymond.

He slid out of the tent, stood, wobbled. He had forgotten to put on a T-shirt, wore only jockeys, but the air was warm, just a hint of cooler air somewhere near the hint of that deeper pain. He thought that if he could call Michelle, things would be right. She could arrange a flight out of Portland. He could do it himself, but he wanted her to do it. Wanted her to take care of him.

He felt around the table, rooted through bags lying beside Noah's tent, then froze, listening.

"It's so sad he doesn't know," Sheila said. "So pathetic."

"He's not *supposed* to know," Noah said.

“His own brother!” Sheila said.

“Sh,” Noah said.

“I think we should tell him,” Sheila said. “Clearly he’s troubled. That headache. The way he sits around watching people, noticing things.”

“We promised Mother,” Noah said. “All of us. Well, the older kids, Leah, Hannah. I don’t think Micah knows. Definitely not Rachel.”

“That’s not good,” Sheila said.

“We promised.”

I can swim across, Caleb thought. I’ll call a cab. There’s got to be one. In Redding, maybe. I’ll call the police. I’ll hitchhike. I’ll get to an airport, I’ll go to New York. He let these thoughts race, spin, crazy like the beetle-hoppers under the light.

“I think you were right, though,” Sheila said. “I don’t have to worry about David and Becky. Maybe if it had happened over the years, instead of that one time.”

“He has a girlfriend,” Noah said. “We’ve never heard of anything, but then he’s young. If it’s going to come out, it’ll happen later, when he’s thirty, maybe later than that.”

Caleb trembled violently as he listened, frozen in place and trembling, like an old tree in an earthquake. Why wasn’t the lake boiling? The stars falling out of the sky? Something poked at him under his left foot. A pull tab, he thought. One of the old ones you could pull completely off the can. He was sure of it.

“I feel sorry for him,” Sheila said. “Really, I do. You should too.”

“I would,” he said. “If he weren’t such an insufferable prick!”

“Noah. . . .”

“You’d feel the same way if all your life he sat there in smug judgement, Mother’s roly-poly darling Even Dad had this kind of respect for him. That tight little smile he had when Caleb was around. God it pisses me off.”

Caleb slowly moved away, his body vibrating, electric. He found that air mattress Micah had used the day before, lifted it.

“Did you hear something?” Noah whispered.

“Just a squirrel,” Sheila said. “Pay it no mind.”

CALEB COULDN’T FEEL the gravel beneath his bare feet on the way down to the lake, nor the mud between his toes when he stood by the shore. The sky had begun to lighten. It must have been later than five, maybe five-thirty. He pictured a watch. A kitchen clock, the ugly one his mother refused to take down after the remodeling. The surface of the water was slick and smooth, like thick oil, the wavelets like lolling tongues lapping the muddy shore. Caleb tossed a rock. Hardly a splash. He tossed another.

He set the raft down, stepped onto it, knelt, lay back, slid into the water. His body was dark under the brightening sky, his underwear pure, phosphorescent white. The water was warm, the air cool. He stuck his hands beneath the surface, waved them in tiny circles until the turning raft faced the implacable RVs, their windshields, gleaming in the new light, steady like a hundred staring eyes.

CHAPTER 6

THE ROOM UNDER Caleb's parents' house had always seemed vast and cavernous because of the light blue walls, the strangely high, slightly arched ceiling, and because of the paintings. Caleb studied them from the stairs, craning and shifting around Micah, Rachel and Halsey playing pool, three unfocussed figures like swinging blocks in front of the seven painted, gothic windows. No one knew who'd painted them. Leah, the oldest of them, had said earlier that they'd been there since she could remember. Caleb's father, who'd never been in the basement for as long as he could remember, shrugged when Caleb asked him. When Caleb was younger, his father had smiled mysteriously at his questions, inviting him to figure it out as if the answer could be interesting. Each of the windows were framed in light blue—highlights and joints painted as if the viewer were looking into a castle, or church, or house rather than out.

Within the arches, realities shifted. In the background of one, a small village floated around the horizon while in the foreground two stork-like creatures, tortured and sad eyed, stalked thick green snakes and black reeds, mouths gaping, the intersection of their crossing necks like a gothic arch. On the horizon, purple and red mountains, faint, almost erased, faded into a cemetery of telephone booths receding to several vanishing points. In another, two leafless black trees stood side by side, their branches between them merging into countless gothic frames, the twigs woven together like fingers. Between them a flat horizon, yellow fading to blue to purple above, green to purple

below, and along the horizon, tiny figures, seven of them, trudged. Three women, four men, all old and stooped, the women with long white hair, the men with equally long beards. One man was to the left of the first tree, another man to the right, the two of them facing toward the painting's left edge, while the other five figures between the trees moved to the right. It was clear to Caleb that that none of these people would meet because they were on two separate slides, one imposed on the other.

Rachel and Caleb sat side by side on the basement's steps. They'd come down to rest from the soft jazz Noah insisted on playing, from the pressure of happy conversation.

"Maybe Phyllis did them," Caleb said. Phyllis was their father's first wife, Raymond, Leah and Hannah's mother.

"I like that idea," Caleb said.

"Or maybe Dad," Rachel said.

"I like that idea, too," Caleb said. "Maybe it was someone who lived here before us."

Above Caleb, music insinuated itself between bursts of conversation and the squeaking kitchen door. He thought of the bathroom back at Barnes and Noble, the white and dark green, thought of Michelle there, sitting back against the cold tiles, reading a magazine, thinking of him and misty Oregon rain dripping from pine needles.

He shivered.

The entire family, except for Hannah—and Raymond—had been at the house for three days and nothing had happened. Caleb was waiting for Hannah to arrive because he was convinced, had been since his mother's call from New York, that she'd seen

Raymond since he disappeared. She was due in that night, which was the reason they were having what their mother called a party, but which seemed to Caleb nothing more than the whole family doing their own thing, all in the same place. Hannah was supposed to have come down from Canada in time for dinner but hadn't showed up.

He spent his afternoons at Powell's, a block-sized used book store, drinking coffee, staring out the window, leafing through books without much interest, doodling in a notebook, eavesdropping on conversations about movies. Sometimes he walked along the streets downtown enjoying the shifting skyscraper perspectives, the seagulls floating down by the river. One afternoon by the bus station he saw his mother hurrying along, a large white package in her hand. He had no idea how she got there because normally she refused to drive, hated public transportation. He asked her about it later and she changed the subject.

Rows of recessed florescent lights lit the basement and without a sound, winked out, leaving only the two yellow lights over the pool table, enough to play by, enough to see. Caleb and Rachel discussed circuit breakers and pranksters and the likelihood of all the bulbs burning out at once, but finally, they fell silent. The warmer, darker light brought out something strange in the seven paintings along the far wall, something antique, as if they'd been brushed over with coffee. A trick of the two lights above the table, or of the paint, made the skies in them glow faintly, not phosphorescently, but as if they absorbed the light more than the surrounding paint, gave it back more generously.

"Only Raymond could have thought up those things," Caleb said.

“I *knew* you were going to say that,” Rachel said. She put her hand on his shoulder, squeezed. “You’ve got to shut up about Raymond. Noah was right about you.”

“No he wasn’t,” Caleb said, his voice low and steady. “And neither was she.”

“You’ve got to look at the reality of the situation,” she said. “You’ve never had a responsibility in your life. You don’t want one. So you make up this stupid fantasy about Raymond being something other than a messed up guy who—”

“You don’t know that,” Caleb said.

“Know what?” Rachel said.

“I just think there’s something really weird about you and your fixation.”

“Fixation,” Caleb said. “Jesus.”

For a moment he wondered if she knew what Noah and Sheila had thought, but then he remembered how years before, when Rachel and he had lived in the house together, the two remaining, the two youngest children, she’d said the same things, or rather, the same kinds of things, only in place of Raymond she’d said New York, because that’s where Caleb wanted to go. They were in the herb garden—the last time she’d given him one of these talks—after laughing their way to the store to buy milk shakes and French fries for dipping, the salt and the sweet, the hot and the cold, sensations they’d loved since they could remember. She’d told him he was a fool, that it didn’t matter what he finished, he just had to finish something, that it wasn’t the something but the finishing that mattered.

“I think Mom and Dad being rich has ruined you,” Rachel said.

“I thought Raymond did that,” Caleb said. He reached for Rachel’s hair, rolled the fibers of it between his fingers, gave it a little tug.

“What the hell are you doing?” she said. She pulled her hair from his hands. Caleb saw moisture in her eyes, and the glint from the two lights.

“He’s dead,” Rachel said. “You have to face that. Who knows what Hannah thought she saw up there digging around all those graves. She’s a crazy woman anyway.”

Rachel touched Caleb’s knee. “I just don’t think Raymond is the person you think he is.”

“What do *you* know?” Caleb said. “Do you *know* something about him?”

“Nothing,” she said. She pulled off the stairs toward the paintings. Her voice, slightly tentative, had quavered as if she were about to cry, or were scared. Caleb realized that his younger sister, the only person in the family younger than he, knew something, knew something she didn’t want him to know, knew something involving him, knew something he didn’t want her to know.

Rachel pushed the palm of her left hand into one of the paintings as if opening it up. The middle painting was, in the basement’s now lowered light, almost completely black, a night sky, the faint lights of dim buildings near the horizon merging with the light of stars, the glint off the eyes of bird and insects, animals, black on black in a bright light, invisible under the two lamps. Rachel stared at the painting, her hand in the center, and when she pulled it away. There appeared something Caleb had never noticed before, a cloud-like discoloration in the painting’s center. At first he thought it the result of

Rachel's hand, some moisture, perhaps, or dirt, or chalk, but it fit the painting a little too well, balanced the flecks of light, turned them from a random distribution to a galactic swirl. He could almost see in it a negative depiction of a doorway, or a cave, or a mine shaft.

The door bell rang several times, a Church-like gong followed by the shimmer of Chinese bells.

Rachel hurried past him.

Caleb wanted to go up, but not yet. He put his hand on the cloud-cave shape. He couldn't stand the idea that Rachel might suspect what Noah and Sheila thought Raymond might have done to him in the mine shaft. He couldn't stand the fact that he himself had begun to doubt his own memory. A vision? Wouldn't any psychiatrist in the land tell him he had concocted a fantasy to protect himself? He was certain nothing had happened, nothing like *that*, but the idea that others thought so, that maybe Rachel did, that maybe all of them did, filled him with anger, hatred and disgust. For a moment he thought of hiding in the basement, waiting until they went to sleep, then sneaking back to New York, not a single goodbye. But then he remembered Hannah.

After the voices settled upstairs, after the ceiling stopped rumbling footsteps, he climbed as slowly as possible up the stairs and out.

THE MAIN ROOM of the house was two stories high, the side opposite the door an enormous wall of glass, the side opposite the basement entrance a gracefully ascending stairway beneath seven narrow gothic windows lit by street and moon. The door, heavy

and dark, opened onto a marble floor, a short hall with tables for keys and mail, with glass vases for spring and summer flowers, two chairs for people pulling on or off boots, three black, white-light lamps dropping from the domed ceiling.

Caleb's father stood by the stairs holding a glass of water, smiling. He saw Caleb emerge from the basement and nodded.

Hannah, gaunt, her face framed by straight black hair, a shadow over her no matter what the light, was in the big chair at one end of the glass coffee table.

Caleb's mother presided at the other end, her hair teased into a white shell, her eyes Egyptian lined, her thin hands surrounding a tall gin and tonic. She nodded and laughed when comments faltered into silence.

On the couch facing Caleb: Leah and Lloyd and Sheila. Leah was larger than she had ever been, not fat, but peasant thick, her hair in a makeshift bun radiating strays, her large breasts splaying the buttons of a bright white shirt, her legs tucked under a dark green and brown print dress. Caleb wanted to run to her like he had as a kid, be swallowed up by the huge embrace of hers which said, "There, there," and really meant it, could keep what it promised, endless emotional contentment, the absence of absence.

Lloyd matched her in size, his wiry muscles spread over an enormously wide skeleton. His face had spent years in the sun, his hair gray, wiry, a spiraling Einstein. He raised an eyebrow as Caleb stepped into the room, to stand next to a blue tinted, glass statue of Saint Francis.

David and Becky leaned against their father, who stood propped behind his mother's chair. He also gripped a gin and tonic and stared at Hannah, sipping, his face

abstracted, distant. Micah and Rachel sat with their backs to him on the couch facing Leah.

“Caleb!” Leah shouted. “You’re going to look *divine* in a tux! Don’t you think so, Hannah?”

“Indeed,” Hannah said, looking at Caleb, her face guarded. “He’s lost weight.”

“Baby fat be gone,” Leah said. She slapped Lloyd’s leg and grinned at everyone.

“Hi, Hannah,” Caleb said.

“Hi, Caleb,” Hannah said. No one noticed how tightly she held the arm of her chair.

“Would you like a drink?” their mother said to Hannah. “You’ve had a long drive.”

“Maybe later,” Hannah said.

Caleb crouched behind Rachel, leaned down, whispered, “Where’s Halsey?”

“Out back,” she said. “Smoking.”

“You know about that?” Caleb said.

“Are you kidding?” she said.

Micah grinned at Caleb, tapped his temple. Caleb glanced out the window, saw all of them reflected in a red-yellow tint. An orange asterisk caught his eye, the tip of a cigarette.

“For years,” Hannah said, “we’ve suspected people have inhabited North America a lot earlier than we’d expected. Some have pushed the date back forty thousand years, but this site, in Canada, suggests a date before even that.”

“Really?” Micah said. “A Pacific civilization older than Atlantis?”

“Like Mu?” Hannah said. “Hardly.”

“You never know,” Micah said.

Caleb moved behind Hannah, leaned next to her and said, “I’d like to talk to you later. In private.”

She glanced up, her expression. She was thirty-six but looked forty, her face suncreased sadness.

“Hey,” Leah said. “No secret whispers!”

“That’s right,” their mother said, the ice in her empty glass clinking. “Enough of those to last a lifetime around here.” Noah touched her shoulder.

“What are you talking about, Mother?” Leah said.

“I’m so glad you’re letting us wear what we want,” Rachel said to Leah. “What would I do with a bridesmaid’s dress?”

“No kidding,” Hannah said. She patted Caleb’s hand gripping the back of her chair. “What would I do with that? Dig in the dirt all day. Two sons. Maybe my husband would like it.” They laughed.

Their father no longer stood by the stairs, wasn’t anywhere in the room. He’d gone to his attic office, Caleb was sure, to read, to escape all this. Caleb wanted to leave, too. He touched Leah’s shoulder, reached down and hugged her. She kissed his neck.

“You’re so sweet, Caleb,” she said, embarrassingly loud.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding,” Rachel said, laughing.

“It’s true,” their mother said.

Noah looked away, rattled his glass.

Caleb found the door beneath the stairs and in a minute was outside, walking the tightly trimmed grass to the back fence where Halsey stared at the huge, skyscraper shaped window behind which the family gestured and fluttered like sea lions on a simulated shore.

The window had three sides, the middle being the tallest, overshooting the roof a few feet. Around sunset or dawn, the top edge glowed blue, and at night, when the front room lights were on, as they now were, the glass captured the light in some invisible way, driving it up to that sharpened edge, a pyramid of red-orange, an arrow pointing starward. An herb garden collared the towering window, short tight golf green grass and baby tears moss, dozens of ceramic containers spilling parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme, above them wooden frames, ivy shaded birdfeeders, Chinese wind chimes, silent, now, in the mid-evening darkness, melancholy and distant most afternoons when the wind swept away the remains of the morning's overcast.

"Miss the dope?" Caleb said.

"Yep," Halsey said.

Caleb was thankful for his silence, his slow steady inhale and exhale.

Of all of the children of Caleb's father's first wife, Hannah was, outwardly, at least, the most like him. The same rounded eyes over a narrow jaw, the same narrow nose. He'd last seen her for any length of time when he was fourteen and had traveled down to Eugene for a visit. He had been struck by the resemblance, and the way she had the same book crammed office he did, the same desk littered with site maps, geological

surveys, old journals opened to pages cluttered with notes in the margins, on slips of paper, gum wrappers, napkins. She even liked to crouch over her desk, her entire study dark, the walls a deep blue, the trim white, the window blinds echoing dim strips of light on the ceiling and bookshelves. He'd seen her in a pool of yellow light sketching meticulously the curves and shades of what remained of a woven basket.

People shifted around the living room. Lloyd disappeared, Leah scooted closer to Hannah on the couch. Micah and Rachel went to the basement, and someone, probably Caleb's mother and Noah, went into the kitchen, their dark shapes obscured by sheer curtains.

Hannah was alone. Caleb nodded at Halsey and hurried around and in until he faced Hannah alone where she sat eyes closed. A light in the upstairs hallways was on, Leah, Caleb guessed. The soft jazz soothed again, the children laughed downstairs, the kitchen silent.

"Hannah," Caleb said. "You've seen Raymond? You know he's coming?"

She stood, tenderly brushed the hair from my eyes. "No," she said. "Haven't seen him."

"But Mom said—"

"She told you that? She was drunk."

"She wouldn't have made it up."

"I was teasing her. You know how much she hates Raymond."

"Really?" Caleb said. "She does? Did?"

“Look,” Hannah said as she moved toward the stairs. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Hannah,” Caleb said, following her. “I’ve got to see Raymond again. One more time. Something happened a long time ago and I—”

“Caleb,” she said, pushing his chest back. She stood on the first step, leveling them, and narrowed her eyes in the same way she used to when she babysat Micah and Caleb, her lips pursed, about to say, “One more time and that’s it. You’re dead.” Then her face relaxed, and she seemed almost to pity Caleb.

“Caleb,” she said. “Let’s not talk about it. I haven’t seen Raymond in fifteen years and that’s all there is to it.” She continued up the stairs while Caleb stared. Lloyd and Halsey slid open the glass doors, laughing loudly, but Caleb didn’t look at them. He heard Leah and Hannah whispering somewhere near the end of the hall, and he wanted to know what they were saying. He wanted to know why Leah wasn’t laughing.

CALEB’S DROOPY EYED mother—Ruth—mouth upturned in an unfelt smile, mixed for Caleb a tall-glassed gin and tonic with three lime slices pushed under gravel-sized ice, just the way Caleb liked it. The kitchen, aside from ebony stained beams and cabinets, wore sky blue paint as soft and pale as the basement, but with a hint of darkness more sinister than dreamy, as if just behind the color lay cold deep space, or as if, accidentally or surreptitiously someone had dolloped a cup of black into the mix. The door into the kitchen, full length, squeaked in excitement or pain with even the barest touch and opened onto generous counters and a freestanding stove to the left, a breakfast nook,

backed by a south facing window, and a larger dining room, almost a grotto, to the right.

The glassed dinner candles no longer lit the dining room table, and Ruth stood by the sink rinsing an ice tray, her shoulders stooped, her hand a little shaky.

“I guess I’ll get Leah a book again,” Caleb said.

Ruth set the tray in the refrigerator, ran her fingers through the too chunky half-moons from the automatic ice maker and outlined her lips with what Caleb imagined was a frozen finger. “Your father’s giving them a role in the pilot,” she said. “And some cash.”

“He’s got a television show?” Caleb said. “What’s this one?”

“I expect it’ll be terrible,” she said. “All the descendents from the old show ‘catching criminals and dallying among the moneyed rich in post-millennial Vancouver, B. C.’ I wrote the log lines. Not often you can get B. C. and post-millennial in the same sentence.”

“Awful and interesting,” Caleb said. He gulped down half the gin and tonic and realized he was thirsty and opted for water rather than gin. He fished for a glass in the cupboard and poured himself cold water from the refrigerator’s dispenser, gulped it down as fast as possible.

Ruth leaned back against the sink, then walked into the dining room. She fished around the drawer under the china cabinet, took out a long stemmed match, lit the glass cylinder candles in the table’s center. Caleb followed her in, sat across from her, watched her head sink into her hands.

“What’s wrong?” Caleb said. “Are you okay?”

“Too much to drink,” she said. “I should never have more than two.”

“How many have you had?”

“Three.”

He reached across the table and touched her arm. Over her white shirt she wore a dark blue sweater the weave of which was gentle against his fingertips. “Mother,” he said. “What’s going on around here? Feels like secrets everywhere.”

“Where’ve you been?” she said. “It’s always been like this.”

“I don’t believe that,” Caleb said, and then remembered the moment when he was eight or nine and had pushed his way into the kitchen. It was a bright yellow, in those days, with a canvas wallpaper from floor to midpoint on the walls, the floor itself a soft linoleum into which intricate lines had been etched. Ruth had leaned against the sink staring out the window and didn’t turn, as she usually did when Caleb approached her, to look down and smile at him, to ask what her sad-eyed little boy wanted. (Caleb’s eyes slanted down, as did hers, making him look sad, and beneath his eyes lay slight darkness, a thinness of the skin, perhaps, and a few extra folds. Michelle once told him he looked as if he’d just suffered some intense and draining emotion.) On this day, the light was bright, refracting from the windows and the oven doors, the chrome stove top, toaster and sauce pans, and Ruth stood at the sink rinsing something. When Caleb got closer he saw tears in her eyes, and she held a full tray of ice beneath the tap. He watched her shiny eyes, watched the ice melt until the water cascaded from pocket to pocket like a shallow waterfall. When she finally turned off the tap she noticed him, wiped her eyes and touched his cheek with cold, wet hands. There was a picture window in the dining room

at that time, gone now, and through it a moment later he saw Raymond and his father sitting near the back fence talking, gesturing.

“Mother,” Caleb said, letting go her sweater. “What was it Raymond and Dad talked about all those times?”

“Too important to let mere family know,” she said.

“Hannah told me you didn’t like Raymond.”

“She said that?”

“I wanted to know if he was coming,” Caleb said.

“Perhaps he *did* do those paintings,” she said.

“Raymond?” Caleb said.

“He was a strange kid,” she said, and then she told Caleb a story. She’d met his father in one of his classes, a promising graduate student with a talent for writing, though, and she was always the first to admit, without the real drive for substance. Leah and Hannah adored her, five and six at the time, liked to call her Ruthie, loved to play with her in the summer sprinklers and winter showers, letting the water rain over them, turning in tight circles until the drops spun off the ends of their hair. Raymond, on the other hand, was quiet, never let on how he felt, if he felt anything at all. She’d been a little scared of him, a twelve-year old kid who never smiled, never laughed. She’d seen him running up the street, one time, trip, scrape his knee, a bad, bloody scrape, and then pass her without comment, without a limp, the blood caked on the wound, tracked to his socks, his expression as cold and serene as an Egyptian sphinx. “And Gabe played up to this,” Ruth said. “I’m sure of it.” At the dinner table, while the girls giggled and asked

what her favorite animal was, Raymond only stared, saying, once in a while, “I’ve read some interesting things, Father,” and his father would say, “We’ll talk later.” After they were married, that’s what they’d do. “I’d wake up in the middle of the night,” Ruth said. “Gabe was gone, shut away in that study, Raymond going on and on about something I could never quite hear.”

“Yes,” Caleb said. “I know what you mean.”

“A few months after the marriage, he turned normal,” Ruth said. “Puberty, I guess. Happy, kind of dopey sometimes, liked to laugh and point out interesting things a kid would point out—”

“Like an ant on a window ledge?” Caleb said.

“Yes,” she said, “and he could make you laugh. But before that two strange things happened.” The first was a bit of conversation she’d heard before the marriage when she returned from the bathroom after a dinner. She was about to come down the stairs when she stopped, heard Raymond say, “She has to be the one, Father.” She waited a moment before going down, wanted to hear more, but there was only silence, not a movement, not a voice, and when she entered the front room, they weren’t there, were, in fact, in the kitchen holding up the girls, letting them play at washing dishes.

“But the freakiest moment,” Ruth said, “happened after the marriage.” She woke around midnight to find her new husband gone, replaced by Raymond sitting cross-legged on a chair he’d dragged near the bed. His eyes were huge and completely dark, like gaping pits, a trick of the moonlight, and then he said something crazy, in his high-pitched boyish voice.

“You’ll have four children,” he said.

“No,” she said. “Gabe and I agreed we’d not have any.”

“You’ll have four,” he said, “and out of them there’ll be one whom you love most, and one who loves you most, but the one whom you love is mine.”

My mother paused here, her face calm, dancing, a little, in the sputtering candlelight.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Caleb said. “You’re making that up.”

“No,” she said. “I’d forgotten it until Rachel called me about your headache.”

“Why would she call about that?”

She waved her hand. “It’s true,” she said, “I have no idea why, but you’re the one I love best, sad-eyed tubby little kid. And look at you now! So tragic looking! I can hardly stand it.” She turned away, but Caleb saw her reflection staring at him in the China cabinet’s glass door.

“So,” he said. “I’m *supposed* to find Raymond. As soon as Caleb said it he realized what an idiot he sounded like. Was this a mind game his mother was playing? He’d known for a long time her marriage to his father was unhappy, but he thought it was an unhappiness she didn’t mind, perhaps even liked. Maybe she’d said this to manipulate him. He’d always been a sucker for her moods, even now. He hurried around the table and hugged her, drew her up and let her lean her head against his chest.

“You know I’m too gullible for stories like that,” he said. “Don’t tease me.”

He wanted her to apologize, or laugh it off, even say something cynical, but she said nothing, held on to him until someone pushed so hard on the kitchen door it slammed against the wall without squeaking.

“Hey!” Leah said. “What the hell are you two doing in here. Dancing? Come on out. It’s a party. Ruthie? Let’s make some drinks.”

Ruth let Caleb go, patted her hips and, grinning, did a little jog to the kitchen. She wet her hands under the faucet and flicked droplets at Leah, who laughed and returned the favor, the two women body to body, pressing each other for the best access.

“This wedding is going to be *fun*,” Leah said. “*Fun*, I tell you!”

CALEB WAS NOT the type to demand things of anyone, at least not verbally, but he couldn’t help himself—the two of them stood on either side of Raymond’s old room like sphinxes, as impassive and incomprehensible as his need to know. The hallway was a long one, four rooms on one side, formally Micah’s, Caleb’s, Rachel’s and Noah’s, and on the other, to Caleb’s right, two rooms, larger than the other four, at one time, Leah and Hannah’s, who’d always shared a room, and Raymond’s, just near the stairway which wound up to his father’s office in what had once been an attic. The upstairs was like a hotel when no one was home, beds, desks, childish art but nothing particularly personal, Ruth apparently uninterested in turning the rooms into anything other than a shell of her previous life as a mother. Noah’s was the only door closed. Leah had moved to Raymond’s room when Raymond moved away and she and Lloyd had their things there now. Hannah leaned against one door jamb, Leah against the other, staring at Caleb as he

approached with new drinks, the whispers having faded into the vented air his mother thought wise to have going twenty-four hours a day.

“Hannah,” Caleb said, handing her a gin and tonic, “I want to know what you know about Raymond.” He handed Leah the other gin and tonic and then stood between the two of them, hands on hips, brow gathered, he hoped, in a Noah-like look of disapproval and expectation.

She sipped her drink and rolled her eyes at Leah.

“I know you guys are hiding something,” Caleb said.

“What an imagination,” Leah said.

“Why would we?” Hannah said.

“I don’t know,” Caleb said.

Hannah smirked, poked at the lime in her drink. Leah looked over Caleb’s shoulder. “You know,” she said. “I remember when there were only four rooms up here, two on each side.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I remember that.”

“Wasn’t till after Ruthie came that they divided ‘em up,” Leah said.

“For the kids, right?” Caleb said.

“Before that,” Hannah said. She looked as sad as she had earlier, as distant and troubled. “Before Noah, even. It was as if Dad knew he was going to have four more children.”

“That’s silly,” Leah said.

Hannah laughed. “You’re right,” she said.

They were both looking around Caleb now, seeing the hallway as it must once have been, or indicating that Caleb should follow their gaze on and out so they could whisper and hint in the privacy of their near twinhood. They seemed opposites, Leah loud, boisterous, big-boned and unashamed, Hannah thin, reclusive, genetically sad, yet they shared something which made them seem to Caleb the two halves of a single identity, two moods simultaneously present. Maybe they had something together they didn't have apart, though most probably it was just the way he liked to think about them. They had always been close, though they lived far apart. Caleb had never known them as children. To him, they'd always been adults, even when, as he now realized, they were merely teenagers.

"You know," Leah said. "I'm surprised Ruthie had any more children after that. She seemed so sad." She looked at me. "Until Caleb and Rachel, of course." She tweaked Caleb's cheek as if he were a child, though he was a good foot taller than she.

"Hannah, Leah," he said. "You're trying to change the subject. *I know* you know where he is. *I know* you've seen him." Caleb rubbed his cheek, once again tried to look serious, though it was difficult. He was a child around Leah. He sat down on the steps up to the attic, could see, above him, an amber light in the shape of a half-lidded Renaissance eye staring down.

"Caleb," Hannah said. "I don't know anything about it at all. You're going to have to trust me." She touched Caleb's knee as she passed him to lean against Noah's door. The thought of him in there, listening, lying next to sleeping Sheila, embarrassed Caleb.

“I’m sorry,” Caleb said. “I know I’m being pushy.”

“It’s understandable,” Leah said.

Hannah looked sharply at Leah.

“What?” Caleb said. “What was that? Why is it understandable?”

“Caleb,” Leah said. “You’re getting tiresome. Thanks for the gin and tonics, but maybe you should go downstairs now.”

Caleb leaned back, his elbows on the steps behind him and looked at the eye-shaped light above, let it dazzle his eyes, let it turn him into a painting. Slowly, he stood, walked between them, dragged himself exaggeratedly down the hall, then, not being able to help it, back.

“Leah,” Caleb said. “Why now? Why a man?”

“Oh, Caleb,” she said, gathering the collar at the back of his neck and kissing his forehead. “All of that was just a phase. You know, that was one thing I remember Raymond telling me. He said that in our lives there were things we had to learn, that for some, it was how to reject the world, for others, to accept it, still others it was success, or politics, or love, or revenge. So maybe I’ve learn from all this. Ready to start a new life time. The turning wheel, you know.”

“Do you believe that?” Caleb said.

“No,” she said. “But it’s a nice way to put it when people are nosy.”

“You think Raymond believed it?”

“Jesus, how should I know?” She tugged at Caleb’s bangs, made him nod yes. “I have to stretch on my tippy toes to reach you these days, little boy!” She thrust her jaw at Hannah. “Christ almighty, they grow like weeds!”

They defeated him, the two sphinxes. He couldn’t get past that there was something going on between them, something they were concealing, something ancient, something they hadn’t been thinking about until Caleb stood before them poking and prodding. But the way they looked at each other, a considering look, as if they might have told him something but had decided, by the empathic link they apparently shared, not to say anything. He felt as if he had reached the end of the road and found only stone, like at the end of the mine shaft when he was thirteen, or found only wood, like his father’s sculptured door, only this was worse because it wasn’t anything real, wasn’t physical, wasn’t something he could reach out and touch.

He stepped onto the stairs again, this time not looking back at them, and started up the creaking stairs as he had so many times before.

CALEB’S FATHER—GABRIEL—seemed asleep in his chair, his eyes closed, his head back, his feet up, his body almost horizontal as Caleb watched and waited.

“Sit down,” Gabriel said without moving. “Caleb, I knew you’d be up here sooner or later.”

“Really?”

“You’ve been staring at me since you’ve gotten here.”

He had only one chair, but it was plush, had been his own chair for some years. Caleb sat down and couldn't help but lean back as he did, staring down the long room, the long rows of bookshelves converging on a shade covered window on the far wall. The walls slanted, the room being a cut off A-frame, and lamps hung below skylights.

"You've got a new show?" Caleb said.

"Just a consultant," Gabriel said. His hands, one inside the other, lay against his chest. His chin was the highest point on his body. "They pay me handsomely to lend an air of authenticity for fifteen seconds as the credits role."

"You love it, though, don't you, Dad?" Caleb said.

"I do," he said. "A certain crassness to my heart, don't you think?"

Caleb was not sure where it came from, but he'd always held the opinion that his family was intimidated by his father, had something to do, he suspected, with his silence at dinner, with the amount of time he spent in his study, surrounded by books, with the fact that he didn't play with them, didn't read them stories. It was as if remoteness was something to be feared, though Caleb only just then realized that what he had felt hadn't been fear, but envy.

"Nothing wrong with money," Caleb said. "And it gets you into the open air."

"Indeed," Gabriel said, laughing, pulling himself into a sitting position. He looked at Caleb, but didn't say anything. This was his way. Caleb looked back, wanting to say something, but not. "I've heard," Gabriel finally said, "that your curiosity about Raymond has finally surfaced."

"Yes," Caleb said. "Everyone is extremely annoyed."

“Understandable,” Gabriel said. “When you ask questions about the past, about people who aren’t there, you’re implying their importance above the present.”

“But that’s not true,” Caleb said.

“Perception is nine tenths of the truth.”

“Dad,” Caleb said. “Dad, there are so many secrets wandering around here. Or am I just imagining it?” He stood, walked to the first lamp just at the level of his eyes, tapped it, let it swing pendulum-like, washing light left, then right, then left. “No one knows what happened to Raymond,” Caleb said. “Except you.”

“You think I know?”

“Yes,” Caleb said. “I think you and he planned it for years. I think the sphinxes know about it, too, but of course they’re silent.”

“Sphinxes?” Gabriel said. He laughed, long and loud. “Perfect,” he said. “That’s them.”

“Dad,” Caleb said. “Am I right?”

“I do believe you’re right,” he said. “They do have that quality about them, but I’m not sure there’s a riddle to be solved.”

“Dad,” Caleb said. “Where’s Raymond? Is he dead?”

“Sit down.” Caleb did, this time as upright and tight as possible. Gabriel leaned back again. After a few moments, it was clear his father wasn’t going to answer. He was as cagey as a president. Why not a denial? Why not an admission? What could possibly be so difficult about the truth? He’d once told Caleb that in the academic world, all versions of the truth were up for ridicule and so it became implicit that you’d admit

nothing for fear your foundations would turn to sand. Maybe his father didn't even realize what he was doing.

"Before you were born," he finally said, "when Phyllis was still alive, we rented a house northwest of here, closer to the ocean, on the outskirts of a small town. The long road up to the house took a good fifteen minutes to negotiate in a car, a beautifully twisty road. Made you feel every evening that you were ascending into the sky, as remote from most humans as a Tibetan monastery. One day I took Raymond to school with me. He must have been six or seven and Phyllis wanted him out of her hair while she took care of the new baby. Leah, I think. Raymond had the habit of disappearing on her, and she'd worry that he'd run into some bigger kids, or be attacked by a roving dog in that fenceless neighborhood. More often than not she'd find him just out of sight sitting on a tree stump in some sort of trance. This frightened her most of all. So once in a while I'd take Raymond down to my office, let him read books, look at pictures, wander the hall to the delight of most of my colleagues, who liked a child staring wide eyed at them. What I remember was the day the car broke down just before we began to climb the hill toward home. I pushed the car onto a fire road, left a note on it, and together Raymond and I headed for home on foot. I must have made a comment about how out of shape I was, or about how long the road seemed on foot, and he looked at me in the cold way he had back then, grabbed my hand and guided me off the side of the road. He'd seen a deer track and pulled me through some brush and although it was uncomfortable, I was curious about where he was wordlessly leading me. We made it to a foot path barely seeable among the fallen needles and leaves, and then onto a stronger path which forked

many times, went up and down hill. I wasn't sure where we were. Raymond was. He'd stop on a small rise, put his hand over his eyes, though it was full dusk, glance around like a desert Captain at war in Northern Africa, and off we'd go until, after a gentle and long climb, we ended up in our own backyard. He had an unerring sense of direction. I asked him if he'd ever made that trip before, and he said that no, he hadn't, but he knew it was possible."

Was this an answer? Caleb wondered. The lamp he'd bumped earlier settled once again into stillness, lining up and, from his perspective, blocking the others.

"What was it like," Caleb said, "the last time you saw him?"

His father said nothing for quite a while, and in the silence, Caleb could hear Leah and Hannah whispering once again, then shaking the ice in their empty gin and tonics. Gabriel breathed deeply, as if he'd forgotten to breathe at all in the past few minutes. "You know," he said. "I don't really remember. None of the specifics. Nothing special about it. My old man's memory, I suppose."

"Old men," Caleb said, "remember the past very clearly."

"True," he said. "But not me."

"He's been here," Caleb said. "Hasn't he? Since he disappeared, I bet he's been here."

"You've got a powerful imagination," Gabriel said. He rubbed his beard and leaned back again in his chair. "There was something," he said. "A riddle, I think. He'd been fond of them when he was a child. Let's see, something about a dancer, an ice

skater, two fixed ends and the turning world, a spinning coin. Sounded like a poem from Yeats.”

“Did you solve it?”

“No,” he said. “It didn’t particularly matter to me.”

“Why? Your oldest son is getting ready to disappear forever, as far as anyone knows, and he gives you a riddle, and you don’t figure it out?”

Gabriel shrugged, closed his eyes, his hands resting on either side of his face, covering his beard.

“Well,” Caleb said. “It’s simple. He’s talking about a gyroscope.”

“Hm,” Gabriel said sleepily. “That makes sense. I can see that.”

He seemed to float in the semi-darkness, reminding Caleb of Lake Shasta, the horizontal lines, the clouds shaped like scissors and faces, reminded him of that first sunset there, when his father and Raymond had watched the sun sink into the horizon like molten metal into sand, how they had looked at each other, a brief look, nothing more than a glance really with no meaning in it, but which he remembered down a long echo from then until now, as the exact right kind of look one person should give another, a look of complete understanding, as if they were two tines on a single tuning fork.

His father was right. Caleb had a powerful imagination. He could imagine in his father’s remote and contented distance a world of secrets, and a single, simple truth hidden for so long behind a closed, black, ornate door, there was no getting it out. For the first time in his life, Caleb hated the man, wanted to tip him out of his chair.

Instead, he turned away.

CHAPTER 7

CALEB WOKE UP in his old room knowing exactly where he was, feeling, at once, reassured by the way the light from the window highlighted one wall and not another, the way the vented air caressed his cheeks, a gentle pressure like a lover's breath, yet also oppressed and disturbed by that same constant touching—a mosquito jockeying for the plunge—by the spare, blue-gray walls, featureless and unchanging as a cloudless sky, by the early pale light full of suggestion and defeat. His room was between Rachel's and Micah's, and as he lay with the blanket clutched beneath his chin, he listened for their movements and heard nothing. He tried to sleep again, but couldn't. His mind didn't race, but it didn't stop either. He thought about Michelle, wondered idly why he hadn't yet called her, why he had felt at odd moments, during dinner time lulls, or the moment after a bus had arrived downtown, but before the door had opened, that already she had become the past, someone he used to know, someone about whom he might toy with the idea of contacting, with no intention of ever following through.

Then he remembered the tent, the whispered voices, Rachel's nervous tremor in the basement, and he was wide awake.

He threw off the covers, got dressed, and headed downstairs. Still no sound, no lights turned on, the house as asleep as a tomb full of Pharaoh's children. When he pushed through the door, he resolved to fix the squeak, as he was sure it would wake everyone up. The kitchen was dark. He opened the curtains, looked out on the overcast

backyard, the grass a deep green, the sky shades of gray, a single roiling cloud mapped onto the sky's dome. He poured himself a glass of orange juice, drank it down, then poured another. He found hazelnut coffee beans in the freezer, pulled them out, gambled that no one would hear him grind them and wake up flush with coffee nostalgia and come down the stairs, buttoning shirts or clutching at robe collars. He boiled water. He found the French press, let the coffee steep while he unpacked a six of bran muffins, the dark, moist kind, and on their plate added a dollop of butter, a puddle of honey.

The china cabinet, unlocked, yielded the thinnest coffee cup Caleb had ever seen, and a saucer to match, and with these, and the food, he pushed through the curtain over the breakfast nook and nearly dropped them, startled by Hannah, in a black turtle neck, staring out the window, a mug in her hand, a tea bag in a wet paper towel.

“Caleb,” she said, not looking.

“Up all night?” Caleb said. He slid the dishes toward her, pushed down the coffee press’ plunger and sat down. The curtains were pulled back, and from where they sat, they could see the side yard of the house filled with ferns and lush leafed plants Caleb had forgotten the names of. The grass was longer here. And to the side, better seen from Hannah’s perspective than from Caleb’s, a section of the street in front of the house. Above the fence, a dark, red stained, overlapping of knotty planks, brick rose in the form of the neighbor’s vaguely medieval house. The neighborhood was full of castles: their own modernist, most medieval, some Tudor, others, the oldest on this exclusive hill, modern American nondescript.

“An hour at the most,” Hannah said.

They talked about how dawn in Oregon was rarely witnessed due to the overcast. It was as if time didn't pass, Hannah said, because the light stayed the same from dawn until one or two o'clock in the afternoon, when the clouds thinned enough to let in late sunlight, returning in time to keep the evening shadows from growing too long. Together they sliced dark muffins, applied yellow-white butter, a little honey and drank the coffee. Caleb liked how the window filled the nook with light, how the curtain, not quite sheer, suggested the kitchen's semi-darkness.

After a time, they were quiet, Hannah still looking out the window, her eyes moving too much to be looking at anything in particular. Caleb wanted to ask her again about Raymond, knowing that as irritating as his badgering was it would eventually work, but something about Hannah stopped him, perhaps the sadness of her face, the fish-scale color of her tear ducts, the way she hung on to her mug as if for dear life, sipping coffee in short, near-silent slurps. He remembered the feeling he'd had waking up.

"What's up?" Caleb said. He tried to add a sympathetic tone to his voice, tried to make it tentative and caring, but felt only that he was bullying her.

"Have you ever felt," she said, still staring out the window, "that everything you've ever done, every choice you've made, was a mistake, as if you thought you were playing one game, then found out there was another, or worse yet, that the whole idea of games in the first place is hideously, laughably wrong?"

"Yes," Caleb said. "Just this morning—"

"Oh, Caleb," she said. "You're too young to feel that. I don't know why I mentioned it."

Caleb sliced open another muffin and wondered what it would be like to be eleven years older. How did people survive the years in between? “Maybe that’s why people have children,” he said. “Something else to pay attention to.”

She looked at him for the first time. “Why did you say that?” she said.

“What?” he said.

“Children,” she said. “How did you know? Did Leah say something?”

Caleb stuffed half a muffin in his mouth and sipped some coffee, and as he chewed, it hit him. “Oh no,” Caleb said. “Hannah. Is there something wrong with Bob? Are you getting a—”

“No,” she said. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“My God,” Caleb said. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

She returned to staring out the window, lifted her eyebrow as if to say something. She sighed, set down her mug. She looked at Caleb again, narrowed her eyes.

“It’s not a good idea for me to talk about it,” she said. “Really, it isn’t.”

“You don’t trust me,” Caleb said. “Do you? Not with this, not with the truth about Raymond.”

“There *is* no truth about Raymond,” she said, “and it’s not that anyway. Talking about it, though, keeps all the sadness going. That’s what separations are for, you know? Give time for some other story to start.”

“Hannah,” Caleb said. “Bob’s a cool guy. You have to stick it out.” He grabbed her hands, held them in his, thought about how he’d seen Bob look at her down in Eugene with happy eyes, had seen him smile when she wandered around the kitchen

looking for a coffee cup. Whatever their problem was he couldn't imagine it wasn't something they could work through.

“You want me to be happy,” she said. “Don't you?”

“Yes,” Caleb said. “You just have to keep trying.” Her hands, hard and dry, scratched Caleb's, felt good, in fact, but they reminded him of that trip they'd all taken to Lake Shasta.

He couldn't remember exactly how old Hannah was—eighteen, maybe, or nineteen—but he remembered a night when she and Raymond decided they were going to start the fire the old fashioned way, without matches. They searched while there was still light for pieces of drift wood, hiked higher on the shore and off the path for tall, dry grass and when they had assembled everything, set to work while the rest played cards and loafed under the strain of too many hot dogs. Hannah sat cross-legged with a long piece of wood held tightly between her knees, a stick between her hands, twisting the piece as fast as she could, blowing, once in a while, to try and get things started.

Raymond had found some stones, had lamented his lack of knowledge about what they were, or what gave off the best sparks, and sat beside her, smashing them together over his own patch of moss and dried grass and bits of lichen. The stick's scritch scritch and the stone's snap snap went on for hours. At first no one seemed to notice, then Noah started up a rhythm of his own, tapping the gas stove, and Micah and Rachel and Caleb beat on the picnic table, thumping along, and Gabriel whistled an improvised tune. Later on the noise was plain annoying but despite Gabriel's warning, Ruth's unvoiced but obvious frustrations, and despite Leah's ridiculing, and Noah's constant interruptions,

neither of them would stop. The parents went up to the car, most of the others went for a midnight hike along the lake, but Rachel and Micah and Caleb stayed to watch. They turned off the lantern for a joke, but neither Raymond nor Hannah complained. “They didn’t have light back then either,” one of them said, and “the wood should be drier,” and “humidity might be a factor,” and, “I think I saw something, blow a little easier.” Very dark: no lamps around the lake, the ridges blocking the light from neighboring lamps and campfires. Caleb felt more than saw Micah on one side of him, Rachel squirming on the other side, restless (as he was) and tired (as he was also). The stars flooded the sky, white hot flickers like another shore on darker water, and then Raymond said, “Yes,” and stopped chipping his stones, and there was a spark, on Hannah’s board. Caleb could just see Raymond’s nose and chin, his lips puckered to blow, and Hannah’s hands still spinning, a little smoke, another spark, and then tiny flames licking the grass. The two of them were like the first people, Caleb had imagined, the first people in America, or anywhere, like Adam and Eve after the Fall, having to figure it all out again.

As Caleb held Hannah’s hands, he wondered if Raymond had set her on her path, too, if there was a connection between that moment and the anthropologist she became. The door squeaked, the light flipped on, and Caleb let go of Hannah’s hand. She smiled at him, a forgiving smile, then said, “You’re probably lucky you’ll never marry, never have children.”

“Why do you say that?” Caleb said. Anger flashed through him, and then, like a cool wind, the thought that she might be right, that it *seemed* as if she were right.

Sheila stuck her head through the curtains. “Hello, hello,” she said. “Looks like the coffee’s gone. I’ll make some more. Biscuits?”

“No thanks,” Caleb said, pointing to the bran muffin wrappers. They’d eaten all of them.

“Suit yourself,” Sheila said, smiling. “Don’t mind me. Just feeling a little giddy.” She pulled her head back and Caleb and Hannah listened to her opening cabinets and running water.

Hannah chuckled. “Giddy?” she whispered.

Caleb shrugged, rolled his eyes, then gathered the wrappers and dishes and left Hannah to mull on the nook, her long nails tapping the table.

Sheila plopped dough onto a floured cutting board and flopped it around, pressing and rolling and repeating. She flattened it then used a small glass, winking at Caleb as if passing on an old family trick, and cut out biscuits. The stove ticked as it heated, the little light flashing off just as she finished her last cut. She wore a long blue robe and black slippers. She’d tied her hair back, revealing her neck, which was long and taut, the muscles rolling beneath her skin as she moved. She opened the oven door, slide-scraping the pan of biscuits. He felt the heat hit him as he turned on the tap.

Caleb disassembled the French press plunger, rinsed it, set it aside, added water to the coffee grounds in the carafe. He thought that if Sheila disappeared off the face of the planet, it would be a good thing. If anyone should walk out and never come back, it should be her. Then he thought of Hannah and Raymond huddled around the first tongue of flame, quiet and red, the only sound the hint of waves, the crackle of dried grass. He

poured the grounds slowly into the sink, let the tap water swirl them around, tiny grains like dead souls spiraling down.

CALEB AND HIS father plunged downhill for the first half of the walk, which irritated Caleb because he knew that somehow they would have to make their way back up before returning home. He hated walking uphill—all the effort and nothing to think about but taking the next step, about it being over as soon as possible, about useless vows of dedicated exercise or indolence. Though Gabriel was in his sixties he was what Caleb assumed people meant when they said “spry.” He wore hiking boots, loose dark green pants, plaid shirts, and when on walks, a narrow brimmed canvas hat. He looked like a gardener rather than a professor emeritus, and everyday, after a breakfast of toast and a half cup of coffee, he dashed out of the house, returning perhaps a half hour later, or an hour later, or sometimes not at all. By the time everyone was up and milling around in the kitchen, Gabriel had finished his coffee. Caleb had kept a watch on him and when he slipped out the door Caleb followed, eventually catching up to him at the bottom of the neighborhood. Gabriel glanced and nodded at Caleb when he matched his pace, but then stared off ahead, a toothpick in his mouth, thinking, it seemed to Caleb, about something important, something interesting. Caleb felt a little of the intimidation the man could produce, understanding by a combination of posture and expression, or perhaps telepathy, that he didn’t want conversation, didn’t want to tell Caleb what he was thinking about, that it would be best for all concerned if words were not spoken.

So, they walked.

The sidewalks took them along streets with giant trees older than the houses, Caleb assumed, sacred, he also assumed, to traveling Native Americans, to Russian pre-colonials struck dumb by the continent, along vast lake-like lawns ribbed by recent mowings, along stone fences and iron gates, along a network of fantasies, a collection of owners harkening after more privileged times, when a man was indeed his castle, and a castle meant something. After a while he got into the walk, enjoyed the blackness of the re-paved roads, the whiteness of the sidewalks, the slight breeze, even the appearance of shadows as the clouds, uncharacteristically early, even for summer, began to pull back, thin out. When they ducked into a park, followed an asphalt path which turned into dirt as it wound behind the housing developments through oak trees, ravines, leaping grasshoppers, streams trickling from rusty pipes, Caleb's father finally slowed down, allowed Caleb to walk beside him.

"I'm not sure I understand," he said. "I know you were close to Raymond. There was something interesting between you two. I could tell that. But you were young. Raymond troubled. It's something more, isn't it? That you want to see him again?"

"Yes," Caleb said.

"You wouldn't have come for the wedding if you didn't think—"

"I wouldn't have thought so," Caleb said. "But then again, it would have worked on me, you know? The idea that I could see everyone, that we'd all be together."

"Hm," his father said. "But why Raymond? Why so desperate to see him?"

"Because," Caleb started, then paused. They had reached a steeper part of the climb, a path which wound its way through a meadow steep as a giant's forehead. When

they reached the hairline, a stiff stand of junipers bordering a backyard, Caleb finally said, “Because off and on, I fade out. Something he did to me.”

“The cave,” Gabriel said. “The vision.”

“What do you know about it?” Caleb said. He reached for his father’s shoulder, but missed when his father put on a burst of speed.

Gabriel’s fists swung at the end of his arms like pendulums in an earthquake.

“Dad?” Caleb said. “Do you believe me? That vision?”

“Of course,” his father said. “Why shouldn’t I?”

Caleb noticed something false in his voice. He wasn’t sure where it came from, why it was there, whether his father was lying, being polite, or whether it came from Caleb himself. He hadn’t answered his father, not really. Was there an answer? Why did he want to see Raymond? At first it had been out of love, he supposed, and then out of a desire to know what road Raymond had set him on in that cave. Micah had his books, Rachel her geometry, and maybe even Hannah her anthropology. . . . And now he wanted to find out what had *really* happened in that cave, not what it meant, but the actual blow-by-blow of it.

They moved along dirt paths marking the fenceless yards of newer neighbors, paths Caleb had traveled when he was younger and had forgotten until now. He hadn’t known they led to the park, or that, conceivably, at night, one could travel as invisibly as burglars to all the houses in the neighborhood. Gabriel tramped ahead, his pace slackening just a little, moved as confidently as a backwoodsman born and raised on the outskirts. Caleb sensed they were near home, near the top of the hill and was amazed that

he hadn't noticed the climb, hadn't thought of it step by step. His legs, especially his thighs, numbly absorbed shock as if they had done it all his life. There would be pain later.

They stopped at a small clearing bracketed by two huge trees, Gabriel, his hand against one, breathed heavily, the first sign of exertion Caleb saw. He waited, resisted breathing heavy himself and tried to remember what these trees looked like from the deck of their house.

"Dad," Caleb said. "Did you know Hannah and Bob are having problems? They might get divorced."

"Do you know the situation?" Gabriel said. His eyes searched Caleb's face.

"She mentioned something this morning," Caleb said. "I don't think she meant to."

"Hm," he said.

"It's really too bad," Caleb said. "I liked Bob."

Gabriel started walking again. "It must be hard," he said, "living with someone who has rejected imagination so strongly."

"Bob?" Caleb caught up to him, tried to walk beside him though the path was too narrow, the long grass like a hundred loose shoelaces around his feet. "Imagination?"

"Never mind," he said.

Caleb began to recognize the houses, could see their glass window tower overlooking the primitive tree tops like an alien temple. Their yard was fenced, the result

of a dog they'd kept a long time ago. They rested again at the gate, a new addition, Gabriel leaning both arms over the fence, almost hanging.

"Dad," Caleb said. "I'm surprised you know these paths so well."

Gabriel slid back along his arms, his hands catching the edge at the last moment. He held himself, stretching his arms, pushing with his legs, his face, eyes closed, open to the sky. "When you don't care if you get back to the house," he said. "Paths open. Your feet tend to find the way. It's as if you can't escape."

CALEB'S MOTHER HADN'T renewed her license some years back because she hated driving in the city, was nervous on the highway, had been stopped one too many times by cops thinking she was drunk, medicated, a closed-off, shut-down, desire-defeated upper middle class mother dreaming in valium. She did not like these assumptions, so she took taxis when she had to, carpooled when she could, and since Caleb was home and carless, allowed him to drive her downtown to shop for the wedding, a task Caleb resisted until she said he could keep the car and just drop her off. Although he had enjoyed the walk with his father, the walking part of it, anyway, he enjoyed descending the hill in plush comfort more. Ruth wore a light blue dress, dark blue pumps, and a tan, cotton overcoat. Though it was not cold outside, the wind had risen just after noon and she believed in being prepared. At the bottom of the hill, before they reached the main road heading into the city, Caleb told her he thought something was happening with Hannah, that maybe her marriage was breaking up. Ruth surprised him when she said, "Maybe it's for the good."

“How can it be good?” Caleb said. “Bob’s a great guy. Maybe lacks a little imagination, but I don’t see—”

“Lacks imagination?” she said. “Where’d you get that idea? Bob has seen your sister as whole all this time. That’s an act of imagination if there ever was one.”

They pulled into traffic. Caleb closed the windows—he loved the control panel at his elbow and liked to use it as much as possible—and turned on the air conditioner, which seemed instantly to work. The road was not too busy, not too bumpy, and the skyscrapers, already close, grew taller as they approached and descended the long, shallow bank of the Willamette.

“What do you mean?” Caleb said. “Hannah’s not whole? What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Ruth said. “I’m sure they’ll work it out, for the kids, if anything.”

“Is that what you did, Mother?” Caleb said. “I know you’re unhappy.”

She looked at Caleb. She clutched her purse tightly, let go, clutched it again, her knuckles almost white.

“That’s not true,” she said. “And let’s not talk about it.”

It was never easy for Caleb to tell Ruth’s moods. If there was a default to her it was distracted preoccupation, and if she seemed also a little sad, Caleb assumed she was depressed or sad about something, and if there was the hint of happiness to her, a smile, maybe, or a slight knitting of her brow, as if about to solve a problem, she seemed to be anticipating something. She had seemed like this before the party, cleaning the house, arranging dinner and treats, making and cracking trays of ice cubes, but during the party

the sadness had come again. Always, though—the distraction. Sometimes she made Caleb tired, and although she was in the car for only a few moments, he found himself oscillating between wanting to strangle her for making him want to know what she was thinking, and wanting to pretend she didn't exist.

“I think I'll start at Twenty-Sixth,” she said. “Lots of new shops there.”

“What are you going to get her?”

“Leah's hard to shop for,” Ruth admitted. “You know, I really don't know. Perhaps a tea set. Something handmade, perhaps. A ceramic something-or-other.”

“She drinks tea?” Caleb said.

“No one knows what she does, dear,” she said. She touched Caleb's lower arm and smiled. She was looking forward to—to what? Getting out of the house? The shopping itself? Caleb remembered the afternoon when he saw her hurrying along the sidewalk. He'd been sitting in the middle of the strip park, nothing more than grass and a few black-trunked trees where buildings must once have stood. She'd been wearing the tan jacket which flapped in the wind off the river. She'd come from the bus station, he'd imagined then, heading toward the Morris Street Bridge. To the Morris Street Hotel? He could think of nowhere else along that stretch of road she'd want to go. Perhaps a gallery? A small, expensive bookstore?

“Mother,” Caleb said. “Don't you think I should wait?”

“I'll be fine,” she said.

“I'm supposed to meet the others at the tux shop,” Caleb said. “Shouldn't take too long. After that—”

“No,” she said. They had passed Powell’s Books and were almost at Twenty-Sixth Street. “Really, I’ll take a taxi.”

Caleb found a place to park near the lower end of the street and toggled the switch that unlocked the doors. He did it several times, loved the thunk and switch sound of it.

“Caleb,” Ruth said. “Don’t be childish.”

She got out of the car, gathered her coat about her, gripped her purse tightly, and headed off. Caleb shut off the engine, watched her for a moment. She marched down the street, stopped, turned, looked at him. At first he thought she was waving to him, but she was gesturing for him to move on. He started the car purring and eased into the road, saw her duck into a store. He drove around the block and parked across the corner from where he’d stopped. Ruth came out of the store packageless, headed down the street as hurriedly as she had before, never looking left or right, certainly sure of where she wanted to go. Caleb got out, put money in the meter, followed her. There were trees along the street, small trees. The area, Caleb guessed, had been recently built up into a shiny new downtown quaintness. People in their twenties and thirties in bright colored T-shirts and shorts rambled up and down the street holding paper coffee cups, flirting and laughing. Ruth was not stopping in any of the stores. Her coat exaggerated the wind and about halfway down the street, she took it off. She was not as thin as she’d used to be, but it was clear that though she was fifty, she was still a youngish woman, still elegant and sexy. He’d never seen his mother that way, but there was something about following her.

As if she had sensed him, she stopped beside a young roadside tree and looked back. Caleb ducked into the corner coffee shop at hand, pushed his way past the crowd to the window. She was gone. Outside, he ran down the street to the street crossing beside the young tree. Nothing. She was gone just like that.

Back at the car, he flipped the locks a couple of times, rolled the windows up and down, tried as much as he could to enjoy the motor's whine, and then started the engine. There was no use trying to find his mother. God knows, Caleb wouldn't have wanted to be followed in similar circumstances. But that was the question. *What* circumstances?

THEY'D STOOD FOR half an hour waiting for Leah, wondering which tuxes they were being fitted for, dreaming up alternative weddings in which they wore faded Levis with precisely sized holes cut above the left knee. Noah was his usual quiet self, standing on the curb's edge, toes half off, hands in pockets, while Micah was happier than Caleb had ever seen him, playing rock, scissors, paper with David. Halsey and Caleb leaned against the concrete building, watching gulls swim through skyscrapers.

"People don't honk," Caleb said, pointing to the traffic, "like they do in New York."

"You know what," Halsey said. "This trip is the best thing I've been on in years. Haven't wanted a smoke since, I don't know, since that pancake house in Louisiana."

"I'm glad—"

Halsey grabbed Caleb's hand suddenly, shook it, touched his shoulder, said, "I think I'm going to pop the question."

“You’re kidding,” Caleb said.

Halsey stared directly at Caleb’s eyes, his bangs moving on his forehead like scratches on an old film. He patted Caleb’s shoulder again. “I always knew I was in love,” he said. “But I never knew I was ready.”

“Halsey,” Caleb said, pulling out of his grip. “Be careful. Don’t let all this stuff go to your head.”

Halsey puffed air out of his lips, turned to look up the street. The street had grown busier in the last few minutes, people returning from long lunches, Noah had earlier explained, and except for a floppy white hat in the distance, the heads, blond, brunette, gray, bald, seemed as anonymous as cobblestones. At first Caleb only noted the woman marching toward them as just another passerby, though large and colorful, and then, when Noah and Micah turned to look, Caleb realized floppy-brim-hatted Leah had been pushing her way toward them for quite some time. She wore a red, green, yellow, parrot-and-broad-green-leaf bedecked Hawaiian shirt, the tails of which splayed over a dark green, mid-calf skirt. She wore black heels, dark sunglasses beneath the hat, and the oddest thing of all, she carried a cigarette holder complete with lit cigarette balanced between two fingers at shoulder level.

“She’s a movie stah,” Halsey said.

“A *film* star,” Caleb drawled.

“Does she smoke?” David said. He was lightly slapping Micah’s hand.

“Hello, hello, hello!” Leah said, her arms wide. “A wonderful day for elegant waistcoats, buttons, and mother of pearl!” She bowed at the line of them, swooped up,

touched David's cheek, said, "Let's in!" and swept toward the door, Noah jumping ahead to open it for her.

Racked rows of tuxes and a portly man with a measuring tape greeted them as they pushed their way into the shop, Leah gesticulating at their head, Noah, silent and dour at their tail, holding the door open. Once in, she told the portly man, "Whatever they want, so long as it fits! To each according to his taste, from me, according to Lloyd's wallet!" As she passed, the man nimbly plucked her smoke-trailing cigarette from its long white stem and before Noah could shut the door, flicked it outside. They asked Leah for fifteen minutes if they really could get anything they wanted, even if it were a powder blue leisure suit (at which mention the portly man shuddered) and she said, "Yes! Yes! Why shouldn't the sky attend our wedding!" Noah rolled his eyes and so did Caleb.

They searched.

David chose a black and gray tux with tails, then followed Micah around while he, as far as Caleb could tell, searched by touch, tending toward the Eighteenth century, the frilly shirts, the long jackets. Caleb had no ideas for himself, but moved toward the front of the store, watched Leah slide around, fingering and exclaiming, flicking her non-existent ashes in the aisles. Caleb bumped into Noah who was staring out the window.

"She's crazy," Caleb said.

"She's happy," he said.

"She's an actress now?" Caleb said. "What's with the lighter?"

"She likes to perform," Noah said.

He was right. When she came home with her girlfriends, when she was a Lesbian, she was a little more lively than a person would be at her parents' home, a little more affectionate, a little more the center of attention, her gestures vigorous, knick-knack-breaking. Caleb had come home one time from high school to find his mother putting vases and statuettes into drawers and knew instantly that Leah was due in that evening. A visit never went by without her breaking something.

"Noah," Caleb said. "Have you noticed anything strange about Mom?"

He looked at Caleb for the first time all day. "Have you?"

"Well," Caleb said. "Yes and no. She's the same as she ever was, I guess, you know, distracted all the time, at wits end, or something like that. But either it's the first time I've noticed it, or there's something new."

"Yeah?" He looked genuinely curious, as if he hadn't thought the same thing at all. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, had been looking out the window as if he were a general without much hope for his troops.

"Maybe not," Caleb said.

He turned his back to the window, touched one of the tuxes, a dark gray one with just the hint of tails and a green and black tartan waistcoat. "What do you think?" he said.

"It's good," Caleb said. "I like it."

"An excellent selection," the portly man said, appearing from nowhere, "if that's the one you'd like." He held up his measuring tape. "For whom shall I do the honors?"

Caleb looked at Noah. Noah looked at Caleb. Caleb followed the man to the space in front of the register and spread his arms. Micah and David were nearby, waiting for him to finish so he could all go to lunch. He was trying to get David to think of alternatives to rock, paper, scissors. "It's not easy," he said. "Each thing in the chain has to be able to be bested by what came before it, and best what comes after." David came up with a gun, which shoots a person, who can climb a wall, that falls on the gun. Micah wondered if you could fit earth, air, fire and water into a cycle and for a while they talked about that. When the portly man was through with Caleb, cutting him loose to pick something, Caleb drew Micah away from David.

"Some serious shit is going on," Caleb said. "Hannah and Bob. I think Mom's having an affair. And how can Leah suddenly not be a Lesbian?"

"Caleb," he said. "I really don't want to think about any of that stuff. Whatever is going on is going on, and there's nothing either of us can do about it."

"I know," Caleb said, though deep down he suspected that he'd never *really* know, never *really* think that he should ignore it, or not find out everything he could. "But doesn't it matter what's going on? I assumed we all knew each other. We don't. Isn't that going to affect us?"

"Yes," he said. "So what?"

Leah pushed between them. "Caleb," she said, brushing at his shaggy hair. "I hope you're going to get that cut before the ceremony."

Caleb hunched his shoulders, watched Micah's expression change from tightlipped tension to a relaxed smile when he approached Noah, David and Halsey standing by the front door.

"Pick something," Leah said. "I'm famished!"

Caleb picked out a cross between an Edwardian/Public School suit and an Indian Nehru jacket, with a short, narrow collar, no tie and mother of pearl buttons on the waistcoat. He'd have to cut his hair to look good in it. "We're going to look really weird up there, in a row," Caleb said.

"Nonsense," Leah said. "You can stand anywhere you want."

Once they had been measured and recorded, their importance penned on three by five cards, they said goodbye to the smiling and relieved portly man. Once again Leah led while Noah, as reserved as a nobleman in democratic times, brought up the rear.

They ate lunch around the block, laughing and joking and swilling Pinot Noir. Somewhere in the middle of his second glass, Caleb shut down. Said nothing, laughed at nothing. Felt that these people, his brother's and sisters, were at best, foreigners, at worst, had kept up with one another, cared about one another. Caleb felt as he imagined Raymond might. Ten years out of date.

"Hey, sulky," Leah said. "How's your love life?"

"I met a girl named Michelle," he said. "New York. We're in love—"

"Love?" Leah proclaimed. "What do you know about love?" Her voice grew colder and louder and everyone looked at Caleb, at her, then at their food. "Your version

of love,” she said, “is a sick obsession. That or nothing. Makes sense, though, given what happened to you.”

Caleb remembered the cool deadness of the air in the cave that day with Raymond, the way the air pressed against his eyes when the light went out, the feather-light touch of Raymond’s fingers on his knee.

“What *did* happened to me?” Caleb said. “What are you talking about?”

Leah looked at Micah, at the others, set her fork down beside her plate.

“Leah,” Caleb said. “Tell me. I want to know.”

She picked up her napkin and daintily touched the corners of her mouth.

“Dessert?” she said. “Anyone for dessert?”

CALEB SPENT THE afternoon and evening in his room, reading an old copy of the *New Yorker*, which seemed to have nothing to do with the New York he lived in with Michelle. He remembered the grit and the dust, tacky, oily feel to the air mixed with ocean gusts, not the shellacked, evening dressed, cosmopolitan banter the magazine suggested. His mother had gotten home just before the dinner Hannah and Rachel had cooked. She called up to him, but he refused to answer. She had stood outside his door for a full minute, said his name twice, then waited. He could sense more than hear the shift of her wait as she listened, he imagined, head cocked, white-blonde hair disheveled. For a while, he had listened to the noise, the carrying on and he had wanted to go down, tell them he had had a headache, felt bad about it, didn’t want them to fret and worry.

They would have told him that no one worried about headaches. He would have laughed. They would have laughed.

Instead, he opened his window, let the cooling air mix with the ever-present vents, imagined tiny weather fronts forming in the middle of his room, tiny insipient tornadoes. When he could no longer read a sentence in the magazine without drifting off into bits of conversation he'd had with Hannah, his mother, Leah, he snuck up to his father's room, detached the phone, brought it to his bedroom and plugged it in. It worked. He dialed Michelle's number, got nothing, not even an answering machine. He called his own number. Nothing. He called Barnes and Noble, was transferred to Michelle, who answered in her brisk, confident store manager voice, "Hello, Barnes and Noble, this is Michelle speaking."

"It's me," Caleb said.

"I see," Michelle said.

"I wanted to hear your voice again," he said. "Where have I been all my life? I never realized my family was so, well, mean, I guess."

"Caleb," Michelle said.

"I used to think we all got along great," Caleb said. "I mean, we still do, I suppose. But it seems as if everyone has a private opinion, now days. Do you know what that's like? You just *know* that these people are speaking to you as if you were a child. Not really a child, I guess, but as if they were continually avoiding the subject at hand, like they might a child whose mother was about to die."

"Just stop," Michelle said. "Caleb, I don't want to hear it."

Caleb said nothing. He held the phone pressed to his ear while he shut the bedroom window.

“Why haven’t you called me?” she said. “I know what’s going to happen. You’re going to stay there. You’re going to call your landlord, cancel your lease, and one day I’m going to stop by and find someone else there. A fat guy with bristly cheeks. A strung out fifty-year-old woman.”

“Haven’t you been listening to what I’ve been—”

“You’re not even going to tell me,” she said. “Not even a phone call. And don’t tell me it wouldn’t happen like that. I’ve got reason to believe.”

“I know you do,” he said. “But it won’t happen like that.”

She paused. He heard a single breath, and then a long silence. “Then how will it happen?” she said. “Can you tell me that?”

“That’s not what I mean,” he said. “It won’t happen at all.”

And then the odd thing happened: they were silent for a long, long time. Caleb could hear doors opening in the background. He heard muffled voices through Michelle’s hand.

“Michelle,” he said. “I love you. I want to come home. I’m going to come home.”

“That’s not a good idea,” she said. Her voice was softer. She had forgiven him.

“I’m sorry for not calling,” he said. “It’s crazy, here. Or I’m crazy.”

“I’ve got my ticket,” she said. “I should be there Friday night. I’ll miss the rehearsal. The dinner. You’ll come get me?”

“I will,” Caleb said. “In my mother’s Mercedes, no less!”

“Ah, the rich,” she said.

Caleb asked Michelle about how things were going at Barnes and Noble, and while she talked, the earlier anger and coldness in her voice now gone, Caleb lay back on his bed and closed his eyes, felt, for more than a few moments, that he was floating again on Lake Shasta, the waves rocking him, the moon glaring at him like a bright street light. He promised to call Michelle again, told her he loved her, and hung up. He lay on the bed a while longer, but the waves had gone, brushed away by the air vent’s soft and perpetual flush.

LATER, IN THE middle of the night, he dialed an operator and ordered a taxi, gave the address of a house several blocks away. He waited. His family were still loud, Leah leading the way, Halsey joining in, the occasional shriek from Becky, loud dominating shouts from David. He left on his desk lamp, closed the door, inspected it in the dark hallway. Looked as if he were there, reading in bed, perhaps, or asleep with the light on. He was at the bottom of the stairs when he heard the squeaking kitchen door, so instead of going through the front door, he slipped out the back yard and had to climb the fence to get to the street.

The taxi driver was an old man with a trimmed white beard. Caleb stared at him, trying to turn him into Raymond. It would have been a wonderful coincidence. A perfect one. They could have headed to the airport together, abandoned the cab, purchased tickets to Istanbul, or Jerusalem, or Ulan Bator. Somewhere far, remote, a desert of

orange and brown and brick red sunsets. But the driver was only a man uninterested in talking and seemed, if anything, a little put out that Caleb had automatically slid into the back seat.

They traveled along a busy street, stopping and starting at almost every light. People waited at bus stops, looked idly at videos in store windows, chatted with each other as they walked, pointed toward the center of town where the skyscrapers stood guard.

Caleb had left his things in his bedroom. He hadn't packed a single thing, hadn't even slipped the spare change on his dresser into his pocket. He had his keys, his wallet, his mother's credit card. He would find a flight east. The most direct route. He didn't care how much it cost his mother. When he woke up, he'd be at JFK dialing Michelle's number.

"Michelle," he practiced in the cab's backseat. "I'm home. *Home* home. New York home."

"What's that?" the driver said.

They had reached the wide airport approach, scooted along a sea of cars. Nearby, a plane roared and disappeared. Caleb looked at the enormously tall parking lights, thought of the light at the parking lot in Lake Shasta. He closed his eyes and tried to picture the candle flame and almost had it when the car stopped.

"On second thought," Caleb said. "Take me back. I won't be leaving Portland tonight."

"Suit yourself," the cab driver said.

“I would if I could,” Caleb said. He closed his eyelids and opened his eyes once again on the candle flame.

CHAPTER 8

EARLIER ON THE morning of Leah's shower, Hannah had told Caleb (while they ate dark muffins and sipped Hazelnut coffee) that none of Leah's friends were going to come because they had given up on her when she decided to go straight. "They're selfish," Hannah had said. "Typically selfish. Unable to see things from someone else's perspective, or maybe worse, unable to accept what they see." She had seemed distracted as she talked about it, as if she weren't talking about Leah and her friends at all. The shower was to take place after dinner, and later that morning, Caleb decided to fix the squeaky kitchen door. He found the WD-40, found an old rag, began to work the oil into the kitchen door's joints, opening and closing the door, enjoying the squeak's slow fade. As he worked, he thought of the few weeks Raymond had gotten Rachel and he interested in the Kind Arthur stories. Caleb had been disappointed when the knights wasted their time with the Holy Grail instead of keeping Camelot safe, protecting Arthur, and so on. He'd said as much to Raymond one night and Raymond told Caleb that the stories weren't about politics or history, they were about the development of the spirit. There came a time in a knight's life when he had to break away from his father the king and find his own identity, find his own place, or maybe create the two. After Leah's hints, after Michelle's disappointment in him, his sadness at having to be apart from her, Caleb wondered if it was his time to leave the castle, give up the king and all the courtiers. He began to understand the need to. Perhaps Raymond had done the same thing ten years

before. Perhaps he was tired and ashamed of petty secrets hidden behind will and a decorous peace.

“Caleb,” Ruth said, appearing out of nowhere and laying a hand on his shoulder. She smiled, pushed his shaggy hair behind his ear. “I’ve been meaning to fix that for such a long time.” She looked at him with her droopy eyes so much like his. At the kitchen sink, she washed her hands and Caleb went back to swing the door until the last of the squeaking went away. Just over the sink, hooked up to a cabinet was an old fashioned phone, one that must have come with the house. It had an actual dial. Ruth used it, slowly, calmly while she stood beside her washing my hands.

“I’d like a taxi,” she said.

“Wait, Mom,” Caleb said. “I’ll drive.”

She rested the phone on the receiver. “That’s all right, Caleb,” she said. “A taxi is fine.”

“Mom,” Caleb said. “I have to go into town anyway. Get something for Leah.”

She canceled the taxi and half an hour later they were on the road, Ruth languid, relaxed in the front seat, her shoulder against the window. Her eyes slipped closed, fluttered open only when Caleb stopped the car, took a turn a little too sharply. She didn’t look as if she were expecting something.

“Mother,” Caleb said. “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” she said. “A little tired is all. I might be coming down with something.”

“Should we go back?”

“Have to get something for Leah, too,” she said. “And I like my time alone.”

“I know what you mean,” Caleb said. He imagined the sound of horse hooves on a gravelly road.

She decided that she’d like to be dropped off and that he could take the car for a spin if he liked. He was going to argue that they could just as easily shop together, but then he didn’t, letting his curiosity get the best of him. He dropped her off at the KOIN center, which was a difficult thing because there was no place to park quickly and easily. He drove around, saw her heading down Sixth toward the North Park blocks. He found a cheap parking garage, and after a few hurried moments, found her, followed her to the park where she sat on the same bench he had a few days ago when he’d first seen her in the city, carrying that white package. He stood outside Powell’s technical book annex and watched her. She sat quietly, still relaxed, he figured, too relaxed. He’d have to check her medicine cabinet at home. He couldn’t believe she’d take something, but then again, why not?

The overcast, in a matter of minutes, began to darken, but the birds still fluttered around the grass, flew from tree to tree, which meant the rain wasn’t going to be short and sweet, but a long, long Oregon drizzle, a summertime echo of an early fall. When the clouds burst, it rained hard for about five minutes. Caleb was under the store’s awning, but his mother remained on the bench, pulling the light coat she always wore over her head, letting the rain pelt, pour and splash around her.

A man taller than Caleb stopped beside her, his black rain coat and hat dripping water. He handed her the umbrella he’d been using. He sat down next to her, very close

to her, put his arm around her. He imagined himself accidentally stopping by, a surprised, “Mom! I thought you were shopping! What are you doing in the rain?” All he could do was watch. He waited for her to kiss the man, or for the man to kiss her. She held the umbrella above their heads and the man took his hat off, shook it. His hair was silver, his skin dark, a permanent tan look to it, his nose large, his eyebrows bushy. He did not look like Caleb’s father. His neck was thick. He looked solid, as if all his life he’d worked with his body. When the rain stopped, they got up, started walking. Caleb followed them as they walked toward the seedier part of town with the old hotels, watched them enter one, *The Elsinore*. He ducked into an alternative CD shop across the street, found a section of window not covered by posters, and watched.

The hotel had a coffee shop on the first floor, narrow windows above obscured by rust colored fire escapes. The marquee, a nose in the middle of the building, beamed out at traffic, the “L” and “I” burnt out. At night, it would say, “E snore.” Within minutes, Caleb saw the man and his mother at a booth near the window sipping glasses of water and looking at the menu. His stomach growled. He waited for this to hit him, to shock him, to sadden him, but all he felt was a little tired, a little anxious to get something to eat himself, to find someone to talk to, like Raymond. More and more he hoped Raymond wouldn’t show up, that Hannah would admit she’d seen him, that Caleb would be able to set out to look for him. The waitress—a woman in a white dress and an invisible face in the window’s glare—took their orders, and then Ruth and the man talked. They laughed. The man gestured several times like a foreigner? He rested his arm along the booth seat’s back, as if driving a pickup.

The music shop, once Caleb pulled away from the window and looked around, turned out to be a grungy little shop spilling music, at the moment, a little girl voice singing over an Indian feel. Teenagers in ripped jeans and gothic make-up flipped through CD cases and techno records, and a dread-locked, rat-like guy stood at the counter, fiddling around with threads.

Caleb flipped through some records, recognized none of the names, wondered, idly, why music was something he never got into. In high school, in college, he had had friends who had every known CD under the sun, really liked music, would talk hours about it with people, but when it came to spending money, Caleb never bought music. The cases over which the dread-locked guy presided were filled with pipes and more pipes and bongs and beaded necklaces and it all reminded Caleb of Halsey, though Halsey looked like your average jock, short hair, muscle just on the edge of fat.

The dread-locked guy, short, his lips protruding as if stretched over bucked teeth, eyed Caleb as he moved around. Caleb wore jeans and a sweat shirt, hiking boots. He had no tattoos, piercings, or necklaces. A girl flipping through torn posters had each of these things as well as spiky hair dyed checker-board red and black, her scooped nose like a porch roof from which hung a variety of wind chimes. For a moment, Caleb fell under the spell of these people, saw them as the outsiders they wanted to be, as some sort of neo-Noble Savage roaming the hinterlands living uncorrupted uncomplicated lives, but then here they were in a store, buying and selling and ringing the greasy till. They had the right idea, Caleb thought, but the wrong method. If they wanted to leave all the lying behind, they'd have to change on the inside, tattoo and brand and pierce something

deeper than skin. The dread-locked guy stood behind one section of an L-shaped display case. Caleb stood in front of the other, looming over small gold statues and wide-bottom, three-legged dishes—incense holders. He picked one out: a squat, cross-eyed, lotus-positioned Buddha with a bowl stretched across his legs. With a cone of incense burning between his hands, the Buddha would appear to be staring at the red, smoky tip.

Caleb glanced at the dread-locked guy just to see if he suspected Caleb would pocket the Buddha first chance, but the guy was looking at the woman still looking through the posters, slowly pushing each wooden board on its hinge, taking her time. The guy's eyes were wide, a macramé necklace or bracelet resting in his idle hands, his mouth slightly open, almost a smile. Caleb looked at him and at the girl. This rat-faced little guy was in love with that iron-faced woman.

Caleb found himself as angry as he might have expected himself to be, but hadn't been when he saw his mother meeting a stranger in the park. Why didn't Ruth turn her efforts to Gabriel? Why didn't she go up into that attic of his and pull him out of there? Why wasn't *he* in *The Elsinore* instead of whoever-he-was? These thoughts rattled Caleb. He didn't want to worry over other people's problems. These things were too complicated. He wanted to walk out the door, find the Mercedes, take off. Skip the wedding. Never hear about Rachel and Halsey, never find out about his mother and what she was doing, or his father and what he was doing.

The rain returned, beating down in earnest. Caleb looked through the postered window and saw his mother and her friend stand. The man threw money onto the tabletop, took Ruth by the elbow, disappeared into the window's glare. Caleb stared at

the door, ready to duck in case they looked his way. They didn't look his way. They didn't even come out the door. A sudden chill rushed through him, a slight dizziness. He waited longer. The sick feeling didn't go away, and his mother didn't leave the hotel.

The Elsinore.

The checker-board girl muttered something about taking a picture as she passed Caleb, pushed her way out of the store.

"Hey," the guy at the counter said. "You gonna *buy* that?"

"What?" Caleb said.

"Really bugs me," the counter guy said, "to have to sit here and watch you just in case you want to walk out with that."

Caleb lifted his hand. The incense holder had imprinted three dots into his palm, deep dots, almost reddish. He took another look out the window, then headed for the counter. The dread-locked guy threw a few cones of incense in with the purchase, said, "Come again."

Caleb said, "Don't do it. Don't get messed up in it all."

Outside he stood under the awning and looked at the windows. Most were covered in off-white curtains, none of them drawn, except one, right beside the marquee, a dark column down the middle. No movement. The rain kept falling, splashing off parked cars, dripping in columns off the awnings, rushing down gutters, through storm grates and up against black tires like waves on cliffs.

THE ANCIENT DIALING system on the kitchen phone had proved so frustrating Caleb finally called the operator to place the call for him. He caught Michelle on her morning break.

“I’m glad you called,” she said. “But I *am* working, you know. I do go home from time to time, you know.”

“Sorry,” Caleb said. He wanted to tell her about his mother, that she was having an affair. He wanted Michelle to resist the idea so that he could prove it to her, prove it to himself. She would not meet a business partner or consultant at a cheap hotel. She would not rent a room there to have a place to herself: the entire house, when the children were gone, was hers. Her parents had always seemed cool to one another. It meant nothing.

“The shower’s tonight,” Caleb said. “I got her an incense burner.”

“That’s all?”

“It’s the Buddha,” Caleb said. “Very relaxing.”

“I’ve had enough of meditation for one lifetime,” Michelle said.

“What do you mean?”

“Last month,” she said. “The month before that. Don’t you remember?”

“Hm,” Caleb said. “Meditation. Yoga. A bed of nails. Nope.”

Michelle laughed. “I mean the way you *were*,” she said. “Close enough. I’d rather have you babbling then doing that stuff.”

“It’s just a gift,” Caleb said. “She has everything. She’s not going to have a baby.”

“Caleb,” Michelle said. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh,” Caleb said. The rain had let up on the way home, but the eastward sky was growing dark, as if the mountains, invisible under the overcast, were stirring a wave to cast over the valley.

“You’ve got to watch out with that distance thing,” she said. “It worries me. I don’t like that kind of worry.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s the kind of thing that drives people crazy,” she said. “All manner of thoughts hatch out of that kind of silence.”

“Like adultery?” Caleb said, softly.

“What?” Michelle said. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Caleb said.

“Do you think I’m sleeping around while you’re gone?”

“No,” Caleb said. “Of course not.”

Michelle muffled the phone. He heard voices, a door slam.

“Caleb,” she said. “*You* haven’t found someone else out there, have you?” Her voice seemed a little angry, a little resigned, but not at all sad, not at all worried.

“No,” he said. “Of course not. Think about it.”

“I don’t want to.” After a minute of silence, she said she had to get back to work. “Is everything okay out there?”

“Yes,” Caleb said. “Much better, in fact. I fixed the squeaky door.”

“I gotta go,” Michelle said.

“I love you,” Caleb said.

“Me too,” Michelle said. “Until Friday night!”

DRAPED OVER THE big chair, her back to the house’s huge entry way, her head tilted as if she’d been looking at where the tower window met the roof, Hannah’s eyes opened when Caleb walked into the living room. The house was silent, and when he asked her if anyone was home, she said she thought their father was out for a hike, though he might have been in his study, as well. Caleb sat on the couch, folded his hands and wondered what to do for the rest of the afternoon while waiting for Leah’s party to start. He got up again, restless, pushed into the kitchen. The door didn’t squeak, but there was a roughness, a scrape to it, felt more than heard while his hand was on the door. It would squeak again soon. No really fixing it. Caleb found some matches in the dining room drawer, headed back for the living room and set the golden Buddha on the coffee table, telling Hannah it was for Leah.

“Aren’t you supposed to give her things like shower curtains and negligees?”

Hannah said.

“Maybe,” Caleb said. “But she’s thirty-seven. Seems weird to do that.”

“True,” Hannah said.

He lit the incense cone, set it on the dish between the Buddha’s knees, watched him watch the smoke stream upward, breaking into turbulence a foot above the table. Hannah leaned back again, closed her eyes, murmured something about not recognizing the scent. Her sadness had been a part of her for as long as Caleb could remember. In a

year's time, he guessed, she'd be single, her children fatherless or motherless. He watched the smoke and the border between the unburned cone and the ash.

Caleb leaned forward, blew at the smoke, watched it sway and break. "Do you think Mom and Dad are happy?"

"Maybe not like they're supposed to be if this were the movies," Hannah said, "but that's the thing. We can't really know, can we?"

"There are ways," Caleb said.

"But it's all in *your* mind," Hannah said. "It's what you're projecting on to *them*."

"What about you and Bob?" Caleb said.

Hannah closed her eyes.

"Sorry," Caleb said.

"No," Hannah said. "It's all right." She sighed, rubbed a kink out of the back of her neck.

"Have you ever thought of having an affair?"

She looked at him, puzzled, then fell back and stared at the ceiling. "Never," she said. "I love that man. He's so affectionate, attentive, good with the kids."

"All the right things," Caleb said.

"That's not what I meant," Hannah said. "It's just the only way I know how to talk about it. There's a quality to him. A sweetness. So sweet that sometimes he seems too vulnerable. Like he invites me to be cruel?"

"Really?" Caleb said. "What happened? You beat him up?"

Hannah laughed. “No,” she said. “Nothing like that. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“So why are you going to divorce him?”

“I’m not,” she said. “He started it all.”

The trail of smoke had grown straight, reaching miraculous heights before it broke. The Buddha seemed perfectly content to which the cone shrink, turn from body to soul right there in his lap.

“He says I don’t hug the children enough,” Hannah continued. “He says I don’t hug *him* enough.”

“That’s all?” Caleb said.

“For him, it means something different,” she said. “That’s what I meant by projecting. I guess I had grown so quiet—my work, my reading, this new site we’ve been working on the past couple of years—I don’t know. When I’m talking, he’s okay. When I don’t, it’s as if I’m not really there, he says. And you can imagine, it’s easy to imagine anything in the face of that.”

“That maybe you’re having an affair?”

“Perhaps,” Hannah said. “The people who love us, they can imagine anything. They *will* imagine anything.”

The incense was nearly finished, turning into a wide, fat crater. Caleb leaned forward to blow on it, and Hannah joined him, the two of them like angels wafting Aphrodite toward land. The ones who love you will imagine anything, Caleb thought, *anything*, as the tendril of smoke retreated upwards into a faint white cloud which, after a moment, melted into the ceiling.

GABRIEL AND CALEB were on the road, Gabriel driving the Mercedes. The eastward darkness had gained on the city, the bright buildings and skyscrapers winking out as the sun, indifferent and alone, became obscured by clouds. Caleb wanted to ask his father about his first wife. What was she like? Had he been in love with her as much as *The Elsinore* man was with Mother? What had she died of? “She was sick,” Hannah had said. “And then one day she was in the hospital and that was it.” Hannah had not wanted to know. Caleb was sure of that. And who could ask Leah? Would anyone ever get the chance to ask Raymond?

They were heading for Powell’s. Gabriel had just wanted to go, and when Caleb asked if he was getting something for Leah, Gabriel had said, “Oh, yes, I suppose that would be a good idea.”

“Bookstore?” Gabriel had said on his way out that door, and Caleb had nodded, nothing particular in his mind, except a general curiosity. Did his father know? Did he approve? Did it matter if he knew or not? By the time they were circling the store in ever wider orbits looking for a parking place, Caleb could no longer keep quiet.

“If you’d had another child,” Caleb said, “what would you have named it?”

“Sarah,” my father said. “If she were a girl. Jonah, if a boy.”

“Why all these kinds of names?” Caleb said. “They all end in –ah. Leah, Hannah, Noah, Micah. Why was I Caleb? Why was Rachel Rachel? And why wasn’t Raymond, well, Old Testament?”

“I didn’t think of it when he was born,” Gabriel said. “And by the time you came along, your mother insisted on her own names. We compromised.”

“But why old Hebrew names?” Caleb said. “Are we Jewish? Is there some sort of secret family history?”

Gabriel laughed, adjusted his sunglasses. At a stop light, they waited—rain dropping in fat splats on the roof and windshield—behind a bus and couldn’t tell if the light had changed until the bus belched a cloud of black smoke and pulled forward. “No real reason,” Gabriel said. “Liked the names. I don’t even know what they mean, or what they might signify.”

“I should look it up,” Caleb said.

“You should,” he said.

They parked, finally, in a cheap, eight-story parking garage by the KOIN center, walked the six or seven blocks to the bookstore under a pair of umbrellas Gabriel kept prudently in the Mercedes’ trunk. On the way up Burnside, they passed *The Elsinore*’s street, but Caleb saw no sign of his mother, or rain-coated man. The sky had darkened substantially, turning mid-afternoon into almost evening, and though the rain was light Caleb sensed that the pregnant clouds would burst and the city, for a good five or ten minutes, would find itself in a flood.

Inside the bookstore, just beyond the lines of booksellers and book buyers, Gabriel reminded Caleb of the system they’d used years before, in which each child had a specific whistle he or she were to use as quietly as possible in order to find each other. Gabriel’s was a long, “hey, low,” “hey, low,” while Caleb’s was a quick, “ooh ooh ooh,” followed by a long “e-you.” He’d been quite proud as a child because of the control it took to bend that last note. After they practiced this a few times, Gabriel headed down

one of the aisles in the purple “literature” section while Caleb headed through the archway into the orange popular and genre fiction section, and through that into the café. Powell’s must once have been a store among many others on the front of a large building. Somewhere along the way it had taken over the entire city block, each room connected to others by a wide door, no one room, seemingly, on the same level as another. The staff had color coded the building and had painted stripes on the floor. “Gardening?” a clerk might say. “Yellow room. Follow the blue line there. You’ll find the books in the northwest corner.” When they were children, it was easy for them to get lost and easy for Gabriel and Ruth to take forever trying to find them, losing Micah, say, while searching for Rachel, and so Gabriel had developed the whistling scheme. He’d walk through the store, whistling very quietly until each child heard and followed, like so many rats after the piper.

The crowded café spoke in hushed voices, splattering, rushing machines, clanking dishes and fluttering page turns. Caleb bought a bitter espresso and sat by the window, watched the darkening clouds thicken, the pedestrians pull their shirt collars around, grab Buy-n-Sells for the eventual protection of their heads.

He was glad for a chance to get out of the house, hoped, vaguely, that the Mercedes would break down, that something would happen to make them miss the party. He really didn’t want to go. How was he going to face his mother? How would he smile and be charming and laugh and have a good time when what he really wanted was to be back in his old New York apartment, staring at a brown plant and wondering why he didn’t get up and water it?

The bitter espresso had grown cold but Caleb drank it anyway, stood, stretched, decided to distract himself by testing the whistling system. He walked through the orange section into the purple, stood next to the Hemingway books, whistled, “ooh-ooh-ooh eee-you, ooh-ooh-ooh eee-you.” Before he could get to the central aisle, his father found him, his eyebrows raised.

“What’s up?” he said.

“Just testing,” Caleb said.

“Careful now,” he said. “You don’t want to be the boy who whistled wolf.”

“Right, Dad,” Caleb said. “Who would I need rescue from?”

“Well,” he said. “You never know.” Caleb was almost as tall as his father, but still Gabriel tousled his hair. “The whistle is a great power,” he said. “Abuse it at your peril!”

They stood beside each other for a few minutes. Caleb felt he should say something, that it was the right time to say something, that if anyone should know about the *Elsinore* man, it should be his father. “How long,” he finally said, “do you need to—”

“I can spend hours in here,” Gabriel said. “As you well know. When you’re ready to go, just whistle. We do have to get back to the party.”

“Unfortunately,” Caleb said.

“Indeed,” Gabriel said, but turned away before Caleb could read his expression. He crossed the main aisle, ran his fingers along the spines as he walked. His father, Caleb realized, was a strange, strange man. He hardly knew him any better than all the

other men of his age in the store. He had assumed he'd had an interior life, that he wondered about things as anyone does, maybe thought about his death, about choices in his life. When he touched those spines, or when he heard Caleb's whistle, did he think about Phyllis or Raymond? Did he remember his children, small beings with the tremendous weight of pain and suffering resting invisibly and for a time weightless on their shoulders? Or was his mind always in the past, thinking of historical figures, of migrations and climates and the mixing of old and new cultures? Was he trying to remember fragments of Russian? Caleb had no idea.

Caleb followed a blue line in the main aisle through the lobby, along a narrow corridor lined with restroom doors, drinking fountains and save-the-forest pamphlets. He followed the line along a balcony over the yellow room and up a set of stairs into the blue section, books about architecture and sculpture. He opened a book at random, found the cityscape of San Francisco. There was the Coit Tower, the Bank America building, and over there, the Trans American pyramid. The Golden Gate looked squashed in the picture's perspective, and not a hint of fog obscured the black and white lines.

Caleb was bored. He was exhausted. He leaned over the balcony, daydreamed about spitting on the heads passing beneath him, about re-arranging the aisles into a vast labyrinth in which customers had to travel a single path to get to any book. "Three miles," a clerk would say, handing someone a distance meter, "and you'll find the philosophy section." Religion would be at the end, because, Caleb thought, if you wanted to reach God, you'd have to work for it.

Then he saw something.

A bit of black raincoat.

A tan smear.

He couldn't believe it. He hurried along the balcony, found the gray stripe and followed it down one set of stairs, up another, through an archway into the brown section, down two sets of stairs into a basement. He paced quickly through the aisles, glanced down diagonals, found nothing. He passed through another area, recognized the green room by the paint along the ceiling and the colors of the aisle plaques. The room was an outside one, on the same side as the café, the opposite corner. The black windows were still dry, but it seemed evening had already fallen. He checked his watch. Four o'clock. Still several hours until Leah's party.

And then there they were. Ruth and the *Elsinore* man. Caleb backed around the way he'd come, found a stairway up to the balcony, and from there watched them. The aisle was dark despite the overhead fluorescent lights, some of which flickered like distant lightening. She held a giant book in her hands, flipped the pages slowly, sometimes ran her finger over them as if testing for smoothness. The *Elsinore* man was behind her, his black coat sinister, his silver hair, his distinguished sideburns making him seem like a CIA agent, a man exchanging information with Ruth about secret Asian negotiations involving the Port of Portland. If only that was what they were exchanging. What was she looking at in that book? Was she interested in gardens? She'd created the bird and herb garden outside the tower window, but that had been years ago, a year long fad, Caleb had thought. Were she and this man going to move into a house? Was she

going to announce a divorce right after the wedding? Yes, Caleb thought. That's exactly what they were going to do, but first, of course, the wedding.

The railing he leaned against was a series of crisscrossed struts. He squatted down and continued to watch them. Every minute or so one said something to the other. They nodded, sometimes laughed.

Caleb thought about his father in his green pants, his brown and white checkered flannel shirt, his large gold wristwatch, his permanently tanned face topped by bushy white eyebrows. He'd be in the history section, by now, the place he always went after picking out a bedtime novel. He thought about Michelle, wandering through Barnes and Noble, a happy shiny version of Powel's. And Hannah for three mornings now leaning her head against the breakfast nook's window, thinking about her husband, her children, her childhood, her mother, all of them lost. Rachel crying in Halsey's arms, "I can't see it anymore." Raymond behind that thick closed door, murmuring in a language Caleb couldn't understand, in tones he could. Micah at the aquarium, reaching toward a dying boy, pushed away to Colorado. Raymond's face the moment after Caleb had awakened after that day at the cave, the worry, the fear, the retreat. Leah's self-satisfied smirk when she'd said, she didn't blame Caleb for being incapable of love, given what had happened. Noah and Sheila, whispering lies in a tent. Where was Gabriel in all this? That grin that day at the lake, his arms around Raymond and Caleb. The wind had ruffled his beard, like a field of wheat under a helicopter's swift pressure. His smile, his closed eyes, his hands above his chest, bridged like a church.

Caleb scooted along the balcony until he was sure he was out of his mother's line of sight, rushed down the stairs and followed the labyrinth until he was near the history section. One of the best things about the history room was that the shelves had no backs to them. Caleb peered over volumes at torsos passing like boats on a river. "Ooo-ooo-ooo eee-you," he whistled as faintly as he could. "Ooo-ooo-ooo eee-you." He caught sight of his father's brown and white flannel moving toward the main aisle. Caleb darted into the next room, the one between brown history and green garden. When he saw his father come around the corner, he turned into the green room without glancing his mother's way. His hope was that his father saw him, maybe thought he was searching in the wrong direction for him.

Thunder, rare in an Oregon storm, rattled the entire building as Caleb reached the stairs, followed almost simultaneously by the flash of lightening. The storm burst directly above. The lights flickered on, rain pelted the windows, covering them quickly in sheets of water. Customers turned to watch the street, except for Caleb's father, who saw Caleb and turned toward him. He waved, grinned, pointed to the ceiling with a what-can-you-do expression. Caleb put up his hand and started walking toward him. His father stopped. Gabriel pointed to the windows, knew that from where his father stood, he would be able to see his mother and the *Elsinore* man. But before his father caught his meaning, nodded, turned toward the window, an enormous boom rolled and then pounded repeatedly, and the lights went out. The store was suddenly quiet, the tinny music gone, the whisper and shudder of voices dying to gasps and the settling rumble of the thunder's aftermath. From far away in the lobby, a man yelled at the top of his lungs,

“The generator will come on in a moment, folks!” Aside from the lights outside, the only other thing Caleb could see was the still flickering fluorescent light where his mother and the *Elsinore* man had been moments before. “Stay put, folks,” the lobby man said. Caleb walked toward his father, bumped into him.

“Caleb,” he said. “You’re ready to go, I take it?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said.

“Keep your hand on my back,” his father said. “Let’s get.”

“Dad,” Caleb said. “We’re not supposed to move.”

“It’s okay,” Gabriel said. “I know this place like the back of my hand. I don’t need eyes for that.”

“There are other folks, Dad,” Caleb said. The thunder clapped again, a smattering applause compared to the last one. The rain continued to beat against the windows.

“Caleb,” Gabriel said. “Put your hand on my shoulder.”

Caleb did, and then half the lights flickered slowly to life, as if his touching his father had triggered them. Caleb looked quickly down the aisle as Gabriel and he began to move. His mother wasn’t there. The *Elsinore* man wasn’t there either.

“Dad,” Caleb said to his broad back.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing,” Caleb said.

Caleb waited beside the front door while his father bought his books. His mother and her friend never showed up. By the time they got outside, the storm had moved south, the sky now light gray. They hardly needed umbrellas at all.

“Odd,” Gabriel said. “Strange.”

“What?” Caleb said, glancing down the street where his father’s eyes seemed fixed. No tan coats, no black coats.

“A storm like that usually lingers in this country,” Gabriel said. “This one passed over as swiftly as a Midwesterner.”

CALEB CONCENTRATED AS best he could on the dishes piled in the sink, scraping roast beef leftovers into a bowl, sending cake and icing down the drain, stacking the dishes, one at a time, into the capacious dishwasher his mother had installed years before, when her four children still lived at home, when her three step-children came home often for holidays and vacations, when meals were events and not afterthoughts.

Leah’s party was loud and noisy and everyone had a good time, or at least Caleb thought they had. He had a lousy time, was disgusted with the sight of everyone there, especially his mother who looked, to his eyes, relaxed, almost, he hated to think, satiated. She gave Leah a mobile, a delicate, silvery cascade of seagulls floating in a widening gyre. Lloyd attached it to one of the low-hanging lamps in the entryway and all through the party most of them spent considerable time looking at it, glancing toward it, reflecting a little on it, especially Becky, who lay down on the floor and stared straight up at it. Sheila tried to drag her away, failed, compromised by turning off the light so as to protect her daughter’s eyes. Caleb had a lousy time, thought he tried to hide it by smiling, chatting, laughing, certain that he was the only one faking it. Ruth hugged him out of the blue, his father winked several times, Lloyd and Halsey and even Noah made a point of

standing beside him, drinks or cake in hand, and Caleb felt that at one time, that always in the past, things like this meant that he was well-liked and appreciated by all.

Leah hadn't looked at him once, hadn't said a word beyond, "How precious!" when she opened his Buddha incense burner, set it carefully on the glass coffee table. She'd always been an affectionate woman, her arms unconditionally open, ready to hug, but this time, Caleb was invisible. Perhaps she, being closest in age to Raymond, had the ability to see behind people's masks. Maybe, Caleb thought, now that she'd given up her lesbianism, her anger and politics, she was moving closer to the family weirdness. Or maybe she was angry at him for doubting her love for Lloyd, for the validity of her marriage. Maybe her anger meant he'd struck a nerve.

The party ended when everyone, at Halsey's suggestion, went to see a movie. "I was never part of a big family," Halsey joyfully confessed, as if he were already part of ours, "so why don't we all go together? It'll be a riot." Caleb was glad to see them go, hoped the best for Halsey. After the wedding, the family would never be this large, never be in the same place, even if Rachel were the next person to get married. The only ones who didn't go to the movie were Gabriel, who headed upstairs, and Leah and Lloyd, who said they were tired and wanted to relax, to go over some last minute details. Caleb didn't go either, opting to carry dishes to the kitchen.

He started the dishwasher, enjoyed the chugging, swishing grinding sound it made, the overloud knock as valves shifted one cycle to the next. The washer was loud and old and Caleb guessed that if his mother expected to do a lot of washing in the future, she'd buy a new, quieter one. He threw a towel up on the curtain rod for old time's sake,

wiped his hands with it, then set to scraping and cleaning the silverware. Ruth had left the maroon felt-lined box on the dining room table and Caleb looked forward to sorting the stainless steel.

He jumped when he felt Leah's breath on the back of his neck. "Hey, buster," she said. Caleb dropped the forks he'd been scraping and shuddered. "Touchy," she said.

"Hi Leah," Caleb said. He flicked some suds at her, she dodged, let them fall on the tiles where they popped into nothingness.

"Thanks for the Buddha," she said.

"You're welcome," Caleb said.

"Ruth came up with quite a gift, eh?" she said. "I wouldn't have expected it from her. She's always been the towel and sheet kind."

Caleb turned off the tap, pulled the towel from the curtain rod, wrapped it around his hands. No matter how much he dried his hands, they seemed to stay wet.

"Do you know where Dad keeps his figs?" Leah said.

"No," Caleb said. "Yes. In the bottom drawer."

She opened the refrigerator and pulled the drawer open, fumbled around until she came up with two, shriveled green figs. "Never used to like these," she said. "Now, can't live without 'em."

"Leah," Caleb said. "What did you mean when you said something about what had happened to me?"

She pointed at the chugging dishwasher. "You didn't put the good knife in there, did you?"

Caleb pointed to where it lay on a dish towel. She picked it up, then leaned against the refrigerator door and started carving sections out of the fig and plopping them in her mouth.

“What did you mean?” Caleb said. “I’m not going to stop bugging you until you tell me something.”

Leah began to mumble something at first, and then eventually said, “People are complex. I don’t buy this idea that there are primal scenes in people’s lives, things that set them on their path.”

“Hannah told me,” Caleb said, “that when Phyllis died, you changed. Even though you were a kid, you got all righteous about everything, angry a lot, and so on.”

“She told you that?”

“Yes.”

“She’s mixed up,” Leah said. “Yeah, when Mother died, we were all sad, Raymond practically catatonic, but it faded. She’s confused growing up with that. Memory is tricky, you know.”

“If that’s true,” Caleb said, “and if your past doesn’t matter, why not tell me?”

“Because I think it’ll matter to you,” she said. “You’ll make it mean something it doesn’t.”

“You said I couldn’t recognize love given what had happened to me,” Caleb said. “That means some past event does matter, and since I can’t remember it, it must really be something. Doesn’t that contradict what you just said?”

She popped the last of the second fig into her mouth and set the knife down next to the refrigerator. “Christ,” she said. “How did you get so smart?”

“Smart?” Caleb said. “I’m not smart. I’m just not twelve.”

Leah looked into the darkened dining room, her eyes, as near as Caleb could tell, unfocussed, remembering something, he guessed. Her face was neutral, slack, the first time Caleb had seen it like that since he’d arrived home.

“You’re a loner,” she said. “So what happens to you is like a grain of dirt for an oyster. You’ll tongue it until it turns into a giant pearl.”

“Pearls are good things,” Caleb said.

“To an oyster?” she said. “Are you sure?”

Caleb folded the towel and set it beside the sink. He’d washed only about half of the utensils, so he plugged the drain and added a little soap and warm tap water so the gunk on them wouldn’t harden.

Leah found the dimmer switch beside the swinging door and lowered the light, finally turning them all the way off, leaving the translucent yellow square behind Caleb’s head, just above the kitchen sink. Without any other source, the light dyed the sheer curtains a pale, sickly yellow. Leah leaned against the refrigerator and crossed her arms.

“You’re being mysterious,” Caleb said.

“You were a great kid,” she said. “Something optimistic about you. A sense of wonder. God, even when I was in my early twenties, it was fun to be around you, as if nothing could go wrong in the world, as if everything was new. Nothing you did, really, or said, just the way you moved, the way you looked around. Raymond once said that

some people were born to live on this planet, completely at home. He was talking about you. Once in a while I'd sneak into your room and watch you sleep like you were my own kid. You'd lie there, gently, your head heavy on the pillow, your breath even, slow, your eyelashes, when you dreamed, flickering like a lost memory. All of us older kids were like that with you. Hannah used to cheer up just being around you, and Raymond, well, you were the fucking Christ child with him."

"Really?" Caleb said. He felt a cloying closeness, the humming refrigerator joining forces with the dishwasher and Leah's voice. He wanted to open the kitchen window, but then didn't.

"Yeah," Leah said. "He couldn't take his eyes off you. Very unnatural, now that I look back on it."

"Oh, come on, you're not saying—"

"Do you want me to stop?" she said.

Caleb reached for the towel he'd folded and just then, the dishwasher gave off a loud knock, and settled into the relatively silent drying part of the cycle. He began to pluck at the towel's loose ends, pulled them apart as if teasing apart a wishbone. "No," he said. "Go on."

"I don't know what the deal was with you, despite what I've just said, why you appealed to Hannah and me, and Raymond, why none of the others were anything other than cute and sometimes annoying little kids, our father's second family, our stepmother's squirmy little brood. If I had to put my finger on it, I'd say it was Raymond's doing. He paid attention to everyone and everything, you know, but you

always got his first attention if you were there, and sometimes I wondered if what he did for everyone else wasn't just a demonstration for you, a teaching of some sort.

"Sometime after you turned thirteen, something happened to you. You weren't the same kid, the sweetness not gone, just not the main thing. It's as if something bitter had reached into you. Hannah noticed it, too. She described it as you having your first secret, something so foreign to you that you didn't know how to hide it. She thought of you as falling. The classic Fall, if you know what I mean. We mentioned it to Raymond, but he wouldn't say anything, turned away as if we'd suddenly disappeared whenever we talked about you at all. You were nearly fourteen before we found out."

Caleb did not want to hear what was coming next. He'd already heard it once. Leah was making it up. She was upset because Caleb knew she didn't love Lloyd, that it was all a sham, and though he didn't know, she must have thought he knew what the sham was for. He tore a little more at the towel, slowly slid down, his back against the sink's cabinet doors behind which pipes, now empty, had recently surged, sucked into the dishwasher's tiny storm. He wanted to tell her it wasn't true, but he wanted to hear her say it. The dry cycle had never seemed so loud. Quietly, he tore a thread out of the towel.

"Raymond had taken you hiking to that old mine up by Mount Hood—"

"You know where it is?"

"Hannah does," she said. "I've only been there once. You know me and directions." For a moment, the old, non-serious, loud Leah returned, but her body hadn't changed, and she became serious again. "We found out he'd taken you up there on your

birthday, that something had happened to you, that you were deathly pale when you got back. Ruth was scared you'd been bitten by something awful. And then you had a migraine, and Raymond said nothing, was almost as white as you."

The flashlight had gone out and he'd lunged forward to find it, but he hadn't found it. The light had gone out, and his eyes had bulged, trying to suck in sight. Raymond had touched his knee. He'd grabbed Caleb's ankles, pulled his legs into a lotus position. It had hurt. The air had been bad. His eyes struggled to suck in light, struggled so hard he saw something strange, lost his bearings, and when he woke up, he was in Raymond's arms, the sky whipped into his light-starved eyes with violence, and then the tangled symmetry of a half-dead oak tree.

"Caleb?" Leah said. She held his hand.

"What?" Caleb said.

"Do you remember what happened on that hike?"

"Yes," Caleb said. "We hiked, we went into the cave, and I admit I was a little scared, and so we came back out. Nothing else happened."

"Something happened," she said.

"Nope," Caleb said. He tried to stand. She reached, pushed him down by the shoulder.

"Think about it," she said. "He was a pretty strange guy. Warped, I'd say. He loved you more than we knew, I think. And maybe he just couldn't help but...."

Caleb tried to stand, but his legs were too far in front of him, and Leah was leaning over him, the yellow light turning her forehead and nose yellow.

“God,” she said. “I can’t even say it. But it explains your behavior.”

“So does puberty,” Caleb said.

“It’s long past puberty,” Leah said. “And whatever it is you lost or gained, it’s still there. I’ve talked to Rachel. I’ve talked to Noah. Even Micah.”

With a concerted effort, Caleb pushed his way up, knocking Leah so that she stumbled backward, almost falling except that, after her hand slipped off Caleb’s, she managed to grab one end of the towel. They balanced for a second, for less than a second, each keeping the other from falling. There was a tiny rip between them, the one he’d torn himself as he fidgeted, and for a moment Caleb thought it might tear, that she might fall to the floor, Caleb against the sink’s sharp edge, but then they steadied themselves and Caleb let go the towel. Leah wiped off her forehead.

“Phew.” she said. “Might have had to get married in a body cast if you would have let go!”

Caleb turned his back on her, reached for the sheer curtains and pulled them apart. The light from the tower window illuminated the back fence, the bench, the unmown lawn.

“Caleb,” Leah said. She snaked her arm between him and the sink, pulled him around, held his arms as she stared into his eyes. Caleb looked at her nose, her mouth, her ears, the strands of hair in front of her forehead, her eyebrows, first the inside, then the outside corners of her eyes. For a moment he thought he might hug her, surrender to her, but instead, he kept the stiffness in his body.

“Now you’ve got a real reason to find him,” Leah said. “You’ve got to find out what really happened.” She hugged him tightly, then gripped him even harder. Caleb let his arms hang loose, his head lull.

“He’s dead,” Caleb said. “What’s the point?”

“No,” Leah said. “He’s not. Hannah’s seen him. She’s talked to him.”

CHAPTER 9

AT FOURTEEN, CALEB went through a growth spurt. Every night his legs, arms, shoulders and back ached and tingled—a bone-deep weariness laced with excitement and the future. Since then, though he'd grown considerably, hadn't felt that kind of pain until he lay in bed all night after Leah's revelations, unable to sleep, trying to turn her into a false prophet. Every once in a while, he heard the murmur of a woman's voice, and the central air sighed into the room like a thousand whispered conversations.

Before dawn, he stepped out of bed, not a hint of sluggish sleep around him, dressed, threw all the clothes he could find in a shoulder bag, scooped up his keys, slipped into the hallway, down the stairs, out the huge front door to the Mercedes parked around the corner. He tossed his bag into the back seat, stood staring at the huge house, the seven gothic windows marching, one after another like a procession of monks, toward the roof, the glass tower peaking above all, waiting to catch the first rays of dawn. Just as he opened the car door, Micah appeared at the passenger side insisting on going with him. Something about the way he looked at Caleb, a seriousness, a slight smile, a strand of hair down the side of his nose, convinced Caleb to bring him along without objection. They talked for a moment about the need to get away from all the conversation and activity. Caleb knew that he himself didn't mean it and wondered what Micah was up to. Almost certainly it was something. There was always something, Caleb thought, these days.

An hour later, Caleb had forgotten Micah was there. They traveled the back way down the Willamette Valley, along Highway 99, a two lane road through farmland, fruit stands, small towns like McMinnville, Monmouth and Corvallis, where the sun rose and they stopped for pistachio nuts and grapefruit juice and turned west, heading for Newport on the coast. The sun behind them, mostly obscured by the hills and mountains they traveled through, cast a dull, twilight on everything, washed out the dark green pine trees, the reddish soil where the road cut through ridges, the blue-green undergrowth, the black road—making it all a grainy picture. Caleb’s lips were dry, split from the salty pistachios he cracked open with his teeth. “We’re in a video game,” he said to Micah. “It’s a good one. Look how things shift perspective with perfect mathematical precision.”

“If we wreck,” Micah said, “do we get a new life?”

“Let’s try it,” Caleb said.

They reached the ocean at the same time the sun broke from mountainous clutches, and as they coasted toward the stop light at which they’d be able to turn onto the north/south coastal highway, the ocean appeared behind the store fronts, a great opening out, the outdoors of the outdoors. They rolled down the windows, let in the loneliness of the sight. Caleb wanted that loneliness. Micah yawned, then belched—a guttural, toady rumble.

ON THE BEACH, they sat cross-legged just out of the waves’ reach. Behind them, a row of neon sweat-suited, wind-breakered old people swayed in slow tai chi motion, synchronized like kelp in a murky tide. Micah hunched forward, poking holes in the

sand, scooping it into mounds and then flattening them again, as if he himself were the waves they watched.

“So, what’s up?” he finally said.

“I guess I expected Raymond to be here,” Caleb said. “I got it all set up in my head that if I just talked to him, I’d find out why I keep tuning out.”

“Hm,” Micah said. “What’s the real reason?”

“That is—”

“No, come on,” Micah said. “It’s never as abstract as that.”

“I miss him,” Caleb said. “Maybe it’s that simple.”

“I do too.”

“And I think maybe he left because of me.” Caleb had never thought of it like that before. He stared at the ocean until the line between sea and sky faded. He let the wind dry his eyes until they hurt. Raymond had been disappointed in him. He hadn’t done the right thing in the cave. He hadn’t passed the right test. Caleb blinked, blinked again and again until the moisture returned to his eyes. Or maybe it was what Noah and Sheila had said, what Leah had said. Maybe *that* was why Raymond had gone away. Embarrassment. Shame. Guilt.

Micah was silent, kept digging and filling, scraping and patting. A wave almost reached them, then receded, leaving a gently arching foam trace at Micah’s feet. “That’s ridiculous,” he said.

“You wanted the truth and now you’re making fun of me?”

“Sorry,” Micah said.

The sun behind them cast out their shadows to meet the waves. The wind had picked up, whipping the edges of their shorts, the ends of their T-shirts looped around their necks.

“What are you going to do after the wedding?” Micah said.

“New York, I guess,” Caleb said.

“Good,” he said. “Make your own future.”

Micah’s longish, curly hair fluttered around his sharp cheekbones. He was twenty-eight, but at that moment he seemed like a child, skinny and hunched over the sand, dust and granules coating his lower arms.

Sharp voices broke behind them. The gentle tai chi masters had turned into children, their thick warm clothes into shirts and shorts, their nylon jackets into kites thrown skyward. Micah stood, brushed the sand from his butt and the back of his legs, then rubbed his stomach. Caleb stood beside him. The wind whipped around them, pressing their clothes like the hands of adoring fans.

THEY CAME BACK to the beach later to watch the sunset, walked south for a mile or two until they struck a giant sandstone cliff blocking the beach. Grabbing clumps of marsh grass, they pulled themselves up a steep, narrow pathway and found a concrete slab out of which sprang rusty pipes like dead plants—the foundation of an old fire station or lookout. The slab ended a few feet from the cliff’s edge, where they sat down, legs dangling, to watch the orange sun sink into the blue-gray churn. For Caleb, the ocean was easy too look at, nothing there to catch his attention, focus his thoughts, only water,

flat, featureless, nothing more than shadowy oil tankers or whale plumes. Micah pulled up his legs so that he could rest his chin on his knees. His curly hair blew this way and that, as random as the waves, as the clumped grass on the shallower parts of the cliff.

“Leah told me that Raymond molested me,” Caleb said. “I overheard Noah and Sheila talking about it back at Shasta.”

“Christ,” Micah said. He pulled his legs closer to his chest, but didn’t look at Caleb, seemed fixed on something near the horizon, something Caleb couldn’t see.

“Is that what everyone thinks?” Caleb said. “Have you heard something like that?”

Micah looked down the beach, rocked on his feet. “No,” he said. “I hadn’t heard that.”

“I don’t think Rachel heard it either.”

The wind picked up, whipped around them, the gusts striking Caleb’s ears like someone blowing across a bottle top. The random noise, loud, soft, never completely gone, made him wonder idly what the world would be like without people, without all that talking and whispering and laughing, without voices on the radio, the television, loud speakers, without minds spinning language inside even in the privacy of dreams.

“Even if it were true,” Micah said, “it’s part of you now.”

“It *isn’t* true,” Caleb said. “It *isn’t* part of me.”

“Maybe it’s the means by which you’ll get somewhere,” he said. “The thing that set you on the road.”

“The road to what?” Caleb said. “Never mind. I don’t want to talk about this. I didn’t come here to talk.”

“So that’s why you want to see him?” Micah said. “To find out?”

“No,” Caleb said. He looked at the cliff’s bottom, at the churning foam against the black rocks. Yes, he thought. *Now*. “I told you,” he said. “I miss him. Really, it’s that simple.”

Micah stood, stretched as slowly as the old people had early that morning, patted his thighs, and said, “Come on,” and Caleb followed him down the other side of the cliff and they walked for several miles until they came to a point nearest a shadowy island off shore. Micah said that next week, after the wedding, that they should come back. Find a boat. A canoe, maybe, and paddle out to it.

“Why?” Caleb said.

“Why not?” he said.

They got back to their car as evening fell, and as they tried to wipe as much sand off as possible before the trip back, they watched the sun’s disc flatten as it sank into the sea. The sky bloomed brilliant orange, quickly faded to blue and yellow. A giant truck roared up the road behind them, passed the parking lot, rumbled down to a row of blue shacks. Caleb took the car along the beach front road for a while and stopped when he reached the cement foundation. “After next winter,” he said, “this place will be gone.”

“Sunk into the ocean,” Micah said.

“Where it belongs,” Caleb said.

THE ANGER STARTED the next afternoon at the rehearsal. First, Caleb got a message from Rachel saying that Michelle's flight had been canceled and rescheduled for the next day, that she wasn't sure she'd get to the wedding on time. She'd take a cab. Rachel had given her directions. Caleb wasn't sure he wanted Michelle at the wedding, or in Oregon. He wanted her disconnected from his family, disconnected from his past. All he wanted her to know was what she knew of him in New York. He understood, now, why she never spoke of her abduction. Something like that, a burden, not because of her, but because of everyone else seeing everything about her in terms of some past horror. He thought about this as he waited for the minister, Leah and Lloyd to work out the details of who would come in which order. He felt that he was no longer Caleb. That he was instead a victim, that there was no escaping it as far as his family was concerned. If Michelle came to Portland, she'd know. Somehow it would get out. Maybe he'd tell her himself. And then he would no longer be Caleb to her.

He was angry because he had told Micah, because Micah hadn't known, and now that he did, he'd always wonder in the back of his mind. Whatever Caleb might do or say, Micah would always wonder if it weren't merely a symptom of that long ago trauma. He'd *have* to think that.

Micah was in the row of pews across the aisle from Caleb playing cards—crazy eights—he guessed, with David and Becky. The anger began in earnest when Caleb moved towards them, thinking a card game, with children (when would *they* know, start theorizing?) was just what he needed. But when he got close, David and Becky threw down their cards and ran away.

“What’s up?” Caleb said, nodding toward the children.

“Who knows?” Micah said. “Those kids are strange. Their own world. That’s why I like ‘em.”

“Why’d they run away from me?”

“Don’t know,” Micah said.

“What did you tell them?” Caleb said.

Micah shuffled the cards expertly without looking at them. “Don’t be paranoid,” he said. “It’s vain. They’re children, for Christ’s sake.”

“They’re scared of me,” Caleb said.

“Nonsense,” Micah said.

Caleb rounded the pew and walked towards them. They ran again, and again they didn’t giggle, didn’t laugh or smile. He followed them all around the church, but they never let him get within a few feet of them.

THE RESTAURANT WAS full of mirrors, Caleb’s family replicated a dozen times in every direction, and from every direction they stared at him, the prodigal, the chronically late, the victim. Since he was the last person there, he sat at one end of the table, the end which stuck out into the main dining room, and while he ate his steak, salad, mashed potatoes, he felt as if at any moment someone might walk right up to him and slip a knife into his back. The mirrors, far from helping the situation, enhanced it. He had trouble distinguishing reflections from reflections of reflections. His father presided at the head of the table, with Ruth on one side, Hannah on the other, Leah and Lloyd, Halsey and

Rachel and Micah on Ruth's side of the table, Noah, Sheila, David and Becky on Hannah's side. Hannah's husband and children still hadn't shown up, and there were no places for them at the table.

"It's going to be such an *interesting* wedding," Ruth said when the dishes had been cleared away and the coffee and cheesecake served. "I can already tell."

"The strangest thing I've been in," Lloyd said.

"How did you get the church to go along with it?" Sheila said.

"The minister owed me a favor," Gabriel said.

Ruth reached for Gabriel's hand, took it, squeezed it. He looked at her, smiled, a warm, unconscious smile. Caleb couldn't stand it any longer. He stood. At first, they looked at him as if he were about to deliver a toast, a look of amusement and anticipation on their faces.

"Look at you all," Caleb said. "How can you take yourselves seriously?" He pointed the fork in his hand at them as if he were hovering over a platter of meat. "Don't you guys even know what the hell's going on?"

They stared back at him, utensils poised over cheesecake, eyes wide and blinking, and a thousand more of them stared at him from every mirrored angle in the restaurant. Caleb jabbed at his father. "Look at you, Dad," he said. "Did you know she's having an affair?" He jabbed his fork at his mother. Gabriel's face, far from falling, or growing angry, or even remaining impassive, smiled—not the automatic smile of politeness or retreat, but a real smile, a bone deep smile, and then he folded his arms, leaned back in

his chair, straight and highly amused. “And even now,” Caleb said, “you’re pretending that none of this has anything to do with you.”

Caleb jabbed again at his mother. “Have you *ever* been happy?” he said to her. “What the hell are you doing here? Get divorced. Move down to the bay area. Noah’s devoted to you, in case you hadn’t noticed. Running off to the city to meet strange men. Christ, Mother.”

He looked around the room, waited for them to look towards Ruth, to see the guilt on her face, or what should have been guilt. Instead, Micah, Rachel and Halsey looked at Caleb, mouths open, forks still poised. Noah and Sheila looked at their plates, their faces darkened, hidden by their foreheads from the overhead light.

“Why do you think she did it?” Caleb said. “Abused by her father? She’s attracted to cold, emotionless men because of grandpa? Or what about him? What deep dark secret is he covering up with his amused indifference, eh? Ever wonder about that? Grandmother died when he was young, right? Left him all alone. That must be it, eh? That’s why he likes history. Can’t get over that one thing.”

“We’re in a public restaurant,” Ruth said. “Caleb, please.” The skin on her forehead was wrinkled, her hairline lowered several inches. She’d set down her fork, then picked it up again, this time gripped in her fist.

Micah stood up. “Caleb,” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“You’re what’s the matter.” Caleb’s jab was almost close enough to stab Micah in the chest. “Nothing happened to you, so you had to go out and find it, eh? Then go fester on a mountain. How typical.”

Noah stood, moved around the table. “That’s enough, Caleb,” he said. Caleb kept his distance from him, pushed his chair out of the way and headed around the table as well. “I heard you in the tent that last night,” Caleb said. “I heard you and Sheila.”

Noah stopped. “Oh,” he said, glancing at his wife. “Oh.”

Leah stood up and put her hand on Noah’s chest. “Sit down, Noah,” she said. “If he wants to throw a tantrum—”

“Tantrum?” Caleb said.

“If he wants to act like a baby,” Leah said. “Let him.”

“How can I not act like a baby?” Caleb said. “You all treat me like one.”

“He’s cute when he’s mad, isn’t he?” Leah said. She looked around the table, expecting murmurs and nods, Caleb supposed, but they were just as silent and impassive with her as they had been with him.

“You know,” Caleb said, jabbing at Leah. “You know,” he said again, glaring at everyone. “I like my older brother. I’d like to find him, see him. Is that so hard to understand.”

Leah looked at Caleb, her face solid and impassive, no more mocking smile, and she seemed about to speak, leaned forward as if she might follow up her words with an index finger tapping on his chest. The silence was awful. Silverware clinked against plates somewhere in the direction of the kitchen. Two bus boys watched from a small waitress station, and the couples, two of them, near the far mirror had stopped eating as well.

“Okay,” Leah said. “That’s fine. Really, that’s just fine.”

Ruth set her fork down, stood. Gabriel followed her. “Caleb,” he said.

Someone in the restaurant had turned on the music, a scratchy string quartet, and then turned it up.

“Caleb,” Gabriel said.

Caleb set down his fork, looked toward a couple—a woman in a light blue skirt, her companion in a bow tie—and behind them, his family reflected, all twelve of them in a dim shadow, and himself, close enough to catch the brunt of a track light, stooping in front of them, his hair hanging around my face. He looked as if he hadn’t eaten in days. Dark circles under his eyes. Frail. He walked toward the image, and then turned and left the restaurant. The air was warm, only a light drizzle, the moisture casting a smooth brightness over cars and street lamps, roads and store windows, as if the world had been shellacked.

SOMETIME AFTER MIDNIGHT, Caleb woke sitting upright and cross-legged. The entire house was deathly quiet, and after a few moments he realized that the air vents were off. The only sound was a gentle lowing, a faint snoring, the slow release of an accordion. The hallway was dark, no lights downstairs except for the gas-yellow glow through the gothic windows. At the foot of his father’s stairs, he stooped, felt for the steps with his bare feet. He wanted to lean against his father’s door, just lean there and listen for the voices, the murmurs, the half-understood words, and that tone, that otherworldly seriousness of closed, large-windowed, medieval rooms lined with books, papers,

fountain pens.... There was a yellow strip of light, another pointed up—an inverted L. The wood was as cool and soft as he remembered, and as heavy, when he pushed it open.

Gabriel hunched over his desk, his yellow desk lamp pushed close to sheets of unlined white paper, many of them covered in dark blue ink—his favorite color for writing.

“Caleb!” he said. “Sit down!” He grinned, set down his pen, shuffled his papers aside and leaned forward on his elbows. Caleb sat, felt like he was talking to an eager professor. He stared at his shoes for a long time, listened for the subtle movements his father made when he shifted in his chair or dragged a sleeved arm across his desktop.

“That was quite a performance,” his father said.

“Dad—”

“You hurt a lot of people, especially Leah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“I don’t know what came over me.”

“Sometimes the truth can make you crazy.”

“The truth?”

“The things you said.”

“How can that all be the truth?”

“How can it not?”

Caleb pulled up his legs, crossed them in the chair, and with elbows to knees, rested his chin on his folded hands. He was suddenly conscious of the heavy closed door,

of the way their voices had been muffled. “The truth,” Caleb said, “is what you make of the facts at hand.”

“And if the facts change?”

“The truth changes,” Caleb said. “Regardless, Dad, I ruined the dinner.”

“True.”

“That’s the fact.”

“Indeed.”

“And I can’t change it.”

“True.”

“Leah says that Hannah saw Raymond. Face to face. In Canada.”

Gabriel sat up, leaned forward, stared bug-eyed at Caleb, then fell back in his chair. “She’s seen him?” He crumpled in his chair, seemed to get smaller, darker. Tears came to his eyes, full-bodied tears falling along the lines of his face, down the creases around his mouth, off his chin, onto his pale green shirt—large, dark spots like bullet holes. “It’s really a very silly thing,” he said. “It really is, these tears.” He wiped at them, but they kept coming. “It’s okay, Dad,” Caleb said. “I understand.”

They sat for a long time like that. His father opened his mouth a couple of times to say something, but didn’t. Caleb could hear his tongue and lips scratching. He wanted to offer him a glass of water.

“Tell me something,” Caleb finally said. “Something about Raymond.”

His father’s eyes moved around Caleb’s face. “I really don’t know what to say,” he said. He waited for a long time, maybe for Caleb to leave.

“My wife Phyllis was nothing special,” he finally said. She wasn’t as smart as your mother, nor as interestingly tragic, or as sweet, or as good looking, for that matter. Raymond got his ears and nose from her, Leah her voluptuousness. There was a warmth to her which it isn’t polite to speak of these days. She was of all things a nurturer, so good at it, in fact, it was easy to lose sight of who she was as a human being, as if she didn’t exist separately from her role in other people’s lives. I’ve thought about it a lot, lately, hating my own love for her lack of identity, trying to justify it. Best I could come up with was that she was the other half of the identity of the people she loved, knew well. Not a mirror, really. A reservoir. One felt one’s depth around her. Is this making any sense?”

“Not really,” Caleb said.

“When she died,” his father said, “Raymond was hit hard. He’d been a lovely, dopey little kid before she died, a sated little kid, basking, I’d now say, in childhood and mother-love. He loved to touch her, hug her. When she watched television in the early afternoons, Raymond would play with wooden blocks, or decks of cards, arranging them in geometrical patterns, circles, stars, triangles, trapezoids, and eventually constellations, spinning the zodiac across the family room floor. I used to brag at the department about these things my kid was doing, but no one believed me.”

“I believe it,” Caleb said.

“No matter what he did, he’d sit down beside Phyllis and touch her. He’d pull off his shoe and keep his toes pressed against her ankle whether he was sitting up, or lying down, arranging and re-arranging his artifacts. And he never watched television.

“After she died,” my father said, “he turned cold for quite a while. I don’t know for how long. Didn’t change until sometime after I married your mother.

“An interesting thing, though.” Gabriel’s eyes were closed, his hands in a church on his chest, his mouth, as he spoke, almost smiling. “I remember a really cold day, very cold,” he said. “That morning I’d gone for a walk and found the night’s rain in frozen puddles, in streamlets of frozen slickness in the gutters. When I came in to drink some tea, Raymond pushed his way into the nook. He stared at me. I knew instantly he was ready to talk.

“You see, for weeks after my marriage to Ruth, Raymond wouldn’t talk. I don’t think he was angry. He never seemed angry. At the dinner table, for instance, he’d listen closely to Leah and Hannah as they chattered, he’d sometimes stare at Ruth for long periods of time. She complained to me about it at night, wondering if there was something she might do. Raymond was such a strange little boy, she said. She felt small in front of him, small and under what seemed to her a scientific scrutiny. What I saw at the table was a mind working something through. He looked curious, and sometimes, when he was cutting his food, or pouring more milk into his glass, his clear forehead wrinkled, as if he weren’t moving objects around on the table, but weighing long strings of abstract considerations. Other times I’d catch him standing on the stairs, staring out the window, looking as if he were trying to see something that wasn’t yet there.

“So when he scooted into the nook, watching me as I drank hot tea after that long, cold walk in the frozen neighborhood, I sensed that whatever it was he was working out was about to be revealed. It was one of his qualities. Or perhaps it was one of mine, and

Ruth's, too, I should admit, that we assumed without even realizing we were doing it that this kid, this little kid, had an awful lot going on inside his mind, that his expressions revealed vast complexity. Perhaps other parents would have seen stomach problems, or simply the sadness of his mother's death. I never questioned his intelligence, his connection with things I had no idea about. Maybe it was what I wanted to believe, wanted to assume."

Caleb shivered, saw an afterimage of his father's face burned into his eyes. He blinked, looked behind him, then back at his father, whose was looking at Caleb.

"The door," he said. "Do you remember all those times we found you, Raymond and I, slumped against it, asleep, in the middle of the night?"

"No," Caleb said. "What happened? That cold morning. What did he say?"

"He said that I would miss him one day."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Hard for him to have been wrong."

"You had to hear the way he said it," Gabriel said. "Sent shivers through me."

Caleb looked at his face for some hint of a lie. He closed his eyes. The tears had stopped rolling some time ago, but in the yellow light Caleb saw where they had been, tiny trails in his old face like dried riverbeds beneath the Sahara's surface.

"What's he doing now?" Caleb said. "This very minute?"

Caleb had never been to Canada, could not imagine the countryside around where Hannah worked. Vast forests to the West, he imagined, and a meadow running down to a

stream, tiny yellow flowers above the grass, Raymond leaning against a boulder, not in a lotus position, not in a robe, just there, in jeans and a T-shirt, a toothpick in his mouth, a baseball cap shading his eyes, one of the laces on his workboots frayed and loose. He'd be standing there, looking across the meadow, the wind shaking each individual blade, posing no questions for him, part of no plan, part of no past.

CHAPTER 10

IF CALEB HAD known what was going to happen after Lloyd kissed Leah at the minister's behest, he wouldn't have gone through with it. Any of it. Not the wedding ceremony itself, nor the trip home from New York and definitely not the camping trip with Noah's family. If he had known how things were going to turn out by the end of the afternoon of the wedding, he wouldn't have gotten up in the morning. He would have stayed asleep, dreaming of thick, green, foamy ocean waves crashing just the other side of a bar of white sand. He'd have dreamed the sound of them, the way the waves hinted at stopping, hinted a quieting, a disappearing. He would have forced the moon to fly away, let the water be still, and on that shore he would have let the sun set, let the dawn take back its own.

He was in his tux, standing in front of the church, a small, Unitarian building outside of Portland proper, in that strange, pastoral nowhere-land between the city limits and the Columbia river's mouth on the Pacific ocean. A plaque bolted to the right of the door said it had been built by English pioneers, was, in fact, an old Anglican chapel. Caleb's father stood beside him, Halsey on the other. They were on Lloyd's side of the altar. Lloyd stood next to Hannah, who was his "best man." Rachel and Ruth and Noah and Micah stood on Leah's side—Micah ridiculous, but also spectacular in his eighteenth century getup, his hair pulled back in a tiny pony tail. A foppish Paul Revere.

They were waiting for Leah to come in. She was taking her time. The organist played a strange piece of music, something modern, in which each note seemed to split into two notes, each of which split again, and again, and then combined, and combined again back down to a single note.

“She’s taking her time,” Caleb said.

“Let her take it,” his father said. “She should have been married ten years ago. Fifteen.”

“Marriage is good,” Caleb said. “Marriage is cool.”

“Let’s not be sarcastic,” his father said, but he was smiling.

EVEN THOUGH CALEB was dead tired, he woke up early, headed down the kitchen as usual. Hannah was there, and so was Gabriel. They’d already made the coffee, and two or three dark muffins lay crumbled on the plate between them.

“So,” Caleb said. “Maybe he’s registered somewhere. What do they have up there?”

“The mounted police?” Hannah said.

“You’re talking about finding him?” Caleb said.

“We are,” Hannah said.

“Why do you think he wants to be found?” Caleb said.

“Who thinks?” Hannah said. “We’re guessing.”

“Feels good,” Gabriel said, “Talking about him as actually existing, you know?”

“I know,” Caleb said.

Hannah then repeated, hurriedly, what she'd told Gabriel earlier, about how she'd been on a dig up in British Columbia when one day, she bumped into a man she'd never seen before brushing at the dirt on the far side of the site, just inside the grid line. "He had a wide-brimmed hat," Hannah said. "I couldn't see his face, but there was something strange about him, or rather, I felt something odd. I was afraid of him, to tell the truth." Apparently he had been a presence to her on the site, his wide shoulders, wide hips, strong back hunched over a square of dirt. "Like a gorilla," she said, "digging for grubs. The sun was hot that day, glared down on everything, made even the dark soil too hard to look at."

"Excuse me, sir," she'd said, her trowel held loosely in front of her. "I don't recognize you. You've got to go through the University if you want to get your field experience." He rose slowly, tilted his brim down so that the shadow more completely covered his face, and then looked out along the field, which swept into a valley and a dark line of trees along a creek.

"To think," he said, "that thousands of years ago, others looked out across this valley. Saw something like what we saw. Were you there?"

"Even then I didn't recognize him," Hannah said. "His voice was not like Raymond's, not that mid-tone, reedy, breathy sort of voice he had, but deeper, more guttural, as if he'd been smoking for the ten years since any of us had seen him." Hannah had, for a moment, looked down the valley with this strange man, at once fearful that he was a Native American bent on preventing her from completing the dig—there had been some protest at the local University that sponsored the project—but also exhilarated. She

had felt transported into the distant past, had imagined herself looking over the valley, thought about the long trek south from the ice bridge, how nice this valley was, cooler than her home in Asia, and so green, even in summer, and how nice the tiny yellow flowers would look in her daughters' hair. Then she snapped out of it and repeated that the man had to go through the university to get work, that they did indeed need people, but bureaucracy was a universe unto itself, and there was no getting around it.

"Then he turned toward me," Hannah said. "A huge grin beneath his hat's broad shadow, a big idiot's grin, and two giant ears out to the side. I remembered the backyard years ago—the dirt pile—Raymond and his tunnel city for bugs, Leah braiding my hair.

'Raymond?' I said.

'Who?' he said, but he was smiling, telling me he was playing a game. And that was that. We hugged. He was strong, much stronger than he'd ever been. Broad and strong, and he didn't smell good. A few days away from a shower."

He hadn't known she was at the site, he admitted, and he wouldn't answer any questions about what he had been doing, where he was living, if anywhere, what he was doing there. It was as if he had dropped out of the sky, just appeared there like a vision. And, Hannah admitted, he was a disturbing vision because it was just after that day that she'd begun to really doubt her non-tenured university career, doubt the uncomplicated distance she had maintained from her husband and children, had weird "literary" thoughts, as she called them, about crazy towns in the Midwest, where, for instance, the only place in town *not* overcrowded with books was the public library, the place where the cultured elite and not-so-elite went to enjoy a large space of blank walls. "I have to

say,” she said to Gabriel and Caleb, “that that guy is like a rogue planet, a rogue black star plowing through a solar system, disturbing all the orbits.”

“That’s him,” Caleb said.

“No,” Gabriel said. “Raymond passes unseen, don’t you think?” He was laughing a little, silent and wheezy.

“Maybe the eagle-eyed Mounties will spot him,” Caleb said.

“A gorilla saint on the loose,” Hannah said.

They laughed and ate muffins and drank coffee and watched the clouds clear uncharacteristically early. It was going to be a great, late summer day for Leah’s wedding, and they discussed that for a little while, but inevitably, Caleb let go.

“Hannah,” he said. “Really, what did you guys talk about? I mean, what did he *say*?”

“You know, I don’t really remember,” she said. “He got me talking about myself, for the most part. But I do remember the feeling of him. Safety and kindness, and love, I suppose, a curious intimacy. He *knew* me, you know? Knew the true me. And that was scary. I was scared and comfortable at the same time.”

Caleb wanted to find Raymond more than ever, now. He wanted, even that morning, to pack up his things, borrow his mother’s car, head to Canada and start searching.

“Do you think he’s still around there?” Caleb said.

“No idea,” Hannah said.

“Big country,” Gabriel said. “Could be anywhere. Maybe he has a shack in the middle of a million acre forest.”

“We know he’s in North America,” Caleb said. “That’s a start.”

“His clothes were in bad shape,” Hannah said. “Patched jeans, stitched flannel shirt. Frankenstein’s wardrobe. I doubt he had the money to get far.”

Of course it was an impossible task to find a man who didn’t want to be found, especially if he didn’t use credit cards. Caleb thought vaguely about using what connections his father had for adding Raymond to one of those unsolved mystery shows, but then put it out of his mind. The only way he was going to find Raymond was if Raymond put himself squarely in Caleb’s path. Caleb had no doubt, or perhaps an unshakeable hope, that Raymond knew exactly where Caleb’s path was, that it was all scripted.

LEAH STILL HADN’T come down the aisle. They were getting impatient. Caleb’s feet hurt, and there was a tiny pebble or seed just under his right heel. He kept pressing, sliding and releasing his foot against the shoe’s smooth leather, hoping the thing would slide away, or just enough away so that he wouldn’t keep paying attention to it.

Things were looking up, he told himself, despite how spare the audience was—a few of his father’s colleagues, a few of the church’s members, a few of Leah’s friends, and Bob, bearded and bearish (despite his thin, bony frame—reminding Caleb of a crusty old East Coast fisherman more than anything else) presiding over Hannah’s young daughters, Lilah and Sarah. No one seemed particularly interested in what was going on,

and they had stopped craning around to see if Leah was coming in. The music, oscillating between twenty notes and one, kept everyone subdued.

“He must be playing with all his fingers and toes,” Caleb said.

“What?” Halsey said.

“The organist,” Caleb said.

“Oh,” he said.

“Wait,” Caleb said, holding his finger up. “Did you hear that? Twenty-one separate notes! He must be using his nose!”

Caleb glanced at Halsey, expecting him to laugh, or at least look puzzled, but his eyes were focused straight ahead at the spot from which Leah was expected to come.

THE MUSIC WAS such that unless Caleb listened to it, concentrated on it, he’d forget it completely, and Caleb had until it began to speed up at about the time the sound of a book falling on the floor reached the front of the church.

“Do you think she has cold feet?” he stage-whispered to Lloyd. Lloyd turned to look at Caleb, frowned. Lloyd looked great in his tux, which squared off his body, hid the fact that his forearms were almost the size of his thighs. Nothing had been done with his crazy, tangled hair, the bush stood unscathed, declaring the man beneath it a genius, or a crazy scientist.

“*You’ll* have cold feet,” Lloyd whispered back, “if you don’t shut up.” He glared at Caleb some more. Caleb wanted to laugh. The whole wedding seemed to him a strange sort of stage show that had nothing to do with anything. Then Lloyd turned,

began to smile. He had a great profile, a line straight from the top of his nose to the top of his hairline, as if he'd been born pressed into a right triangle. Caleb turned to look at what Lloyd was smiling at, and there was Leah, followed in by the music, the notes dividing and contracting at a greater pace. Despite the drone, the music somehow managed to turn from dirge to march, from the ultimate peace to the ultimate triumph. The organ stood where the last pew had been, and was so tall Caleb couldn't see who played.

Leah wore a simple, off-white dress which fell to mid-calf. She looked good. Very matronly. Very marriageable. She wore a white brimmed, off-white hat, a stiff woven thing frozen in mid-flop. She carried a small bouquet of lilies. She glanced at each one of them as she approached the altar, beaming and smiling. Caleb thought she might start laughing at any moment, one of those great, huge, whooping laughs of hers. When she caught Caleb's eye, she grinned a little wider, winked, telling him, he thought, that although what had happened the night before was not to be forgiven, it was, for this day, to be ignored.

Just after the wink, Caleb felt a headache coming on. He relaxed his shoulders, resolved to take a nap before the reception. What he saw next he didn't connect to the headache, but he had begun to notice something about Leah's hat, how the woven pattern in the brim looked like a thousand snakes wound up. The snakes wound down the floppy hat to the scarf hanging off it down Leah's back, then leaped onto the sheer, off-white scarf around her neck. Caleb had tried blinking to make the sight go away and it did, but only because the tiny pebble, or seed, or whatever it was under his right heel began to

throb, and then bite, as if the snakes had found there way underfoot and were even now releasing poison.

When Leah got to the altar, she grinned at Lloyd, nudged him, looked down her side of the wedding party, then down Lloyd's side, winking at Caleb again. The music stopped, the minister moved forward and opened the book between his hands. Caleb held up one hand, then the other, and started clapping, long and loud. Lloyd looked sharply toward him, glared as hard as he could, his bushy eyebrows thrown up at a devil's slant. Halsey started to clap, too, and then the audience joined in, and finally the rest of the wedding party. Leah glanced at Caleb again, a serious look, then a smile. She turned to the pews and bowed, and the clapping stopped, though, somewhere in the back of Caleb's mind, he could still hear it, going on and on, expanding even as it faded, into the applause of the entire world, into the applause of the entire universe, rows upon rows of devils and angels slapping flesh together.

BEFORE HE HAD assembled with the others in front of the alter to wait for Leah, Caleb had gone into the small classroom set aside for the men to change in. Sheila had set up an espresso machine outside the minister's office and Caleb had been drinking the noxious bitterness like it was an immortality serum. He'd also been watching Sheila as she tinkered with the machine, turning valves, pulling her hand away at the machine's slightest exhalation. The way her hands fluttered reminded him of the dragonflies over Lake Shasta, their darting dance between the island and the shore. There were moments when they'd seemed to spring forth like tiny deities from the sharp glints of sunlight on

the water's surface. They were alone. She seemed perfectly at ease with him in the room, not at all aware what her actions at home, what her words in the tent had done to him.

"Hello, Sheila," Caleb said. He moved closer to her. She turned abruptly, seemed slightly nervous between the espresso machine and his body.

"Caleb," she said.

"Do you really think I was molested?" he said. "Do you really think Raymond did something to me all those years ago?"

Sheila moved toward the right, and Caleb followed her movement, gesturing in the direction she moved, stopping her.

"What do you think he did to me?" he said.

"Oh," she said. "Now I understand last night."

"That's good," Caleb said, gesturing again as she tried to move. "Do you think he touched me here?" He grabbed his crotch, let go, held his arms wide. "And now I'll suffer forever, need your pity and fear forever?" He backed away from her, sat on a countertop, his arms crossed.

Sheila walked rapidly toward the door, then changed her mind. "I was stupid," she said. "I guess maybe no one really knows for sure. I never met anyone who has been, who might have been—"

"Molested by his oldest, most loved and trusted brother?"

She looked at herself in the mirror, smoothed stray hairs to her scalp. She frowned. “That’s right,” she said. “True or not, your behavior last night was atrocious. There’s absolutely no excuse—”

“There isn’t?” he said.

CALEB COULD NOT pay attention to the words. They melted together, a little like the music the organ had been playing earlier, and somewhere behind those words, he was certain he could still hear that music, as if the musician were still playing, with the sound all the way down, but not off. He was sure of it. He glanced over the pews, the sparse audience, toward the upright panel behind which the organist sat. The thing seemed warped just a little, as if it had breathed in and out, then stopped in mid-inhale, and there was someone sitting there, someone small, or hunkered down. Caleb’s vision had blurred, as if tiny filaments slid over his eye. All he could see of the person was a drab, army green against the organ’s dark paneling. He wondered idly if it were Raymond, thought how perfect it would be if it were Raymond, taking it all in, ready to slip out at a moment’s recognition. Perhaps Raymond had always done that, flitted about the outskirts of their lives, unrecognized, recording.

Caleb giggled. His father nudged him. He could understand that nudge. “Keep it under control,” it said. “Just a little longer and it’ll all be done.” The thing he couldn’t understand were the words the minister said, that Leah and Lloyd repeated. He could grasp the sounds, knew they were English, even understood the meanings and

implications of each one. It was the sentences that made no sense, no more sense than music does.

He looked at his father, at the back of Halsey's head. The talking was over, but he kept on hearing it mixed in with the music that was no longer playing. Leah and Lloyd faced each other and Caleb had to narrow his eyes to focus on them. The two leaned toward each other, the minister wide-mouthed and fatherly looking down at them. A cloud passed over the church, darkening the place, and at the moment when Leah and Lloyd kissed, when the music started up for real, the audience clapped and Gabriel touched Caleb's shoulder, Caleb's head was pierced by sharp throb. He stumbled back as his father moved forward. The cloud must have been thick because the church had grown as dark as night—except for the stain glass windows, which glowed day bright. Caleb shook his head a few times, moved further back to the place where an arching beam came to rest. He leaned against it. The room was black, now, except for the windows, which darted around like live things.

Oh no, Caleb thought. Oh, hell. A headache.

LATER, IN THE hospital, Caleb tried to put together what happened next, unclear what was real, what was dream, what he might have wished to have happened.

He had stood at the base of that arch for some minutes, rubbing his head, wishing his sudden migraine out of existence. The wishing seemed to work. The pain went away, replaced by something worse: euphoria. Caleb had been feeling a little of it all that day, at least since the breakfast with his father and Hannah. The cloud's darkness had

gone too, replaced by an intense light, not from the windows or some other specific source, but from every object in that church, the pews, the organ, the people, their hats and shows, the place where the arches met the ceiling: every edge in the room leaked light. Caleb stumbled from beneath the arch into the open space of the church. The music came back to him when he reached the center aisle, each note splitting into another note, and then again and again until he was sure the organist must have had a hundred and forty-four fingers, each note like a strut on a ladder, lifting him higher into the cloud of euphoria. He was heading toward Raymond, the man huddled in the back, near the organ. He moved down the aisle, walking, it seemed to him, so subtly he might as well have been floating in one place while the church—in the hands of a giant—moved around me. There was an echo in his body, stumbling thuds and lurching tremors, but they seemed as far away as the past.

White energy streamed from every sharp point as if begging the lightning to come down. Caleb saw echoes of his own body floating before him, countless numbers of them as if he were once again in last night's mirrored restaurant. Behind him, countless more of his selves flowed backward toward the altar. One moment he felt detached from all these bodies, another moment, a single segment in a giant tail-swallowing worm.

Things began to change.

The first was that what had been a pale glow covering everything like low-rising steam, what had been streamers of pale light standing atop the corners of pews, lining the aisle like white-trunked birch trees in winter, what had been these things came together into a tunnel rotating around him, and the church door became a dark spot, then a dark

doorway, then a single, lidless, orbless eye socket. He walked, *floated* toward it, and once through, he was outside the mine shaft Raymond had taken him to twelve years before. The same rutted, gravelly trail, dead wood and leaves on the far side, the same tree-bush with fluttering disc-like leaves tickling his peripheral vision, the same stands of trees on either side of the trail filtering the pale blue sky and there, behind him, the same giant, complex Oak Tree he'd seen when he woke up after Raymond carried him out. He saw the tree in all its aliveness, in all its complexity, and he knew that it was conscious, that it knew what was going to happen to him.

He was certain Raymond had come with him, had snuck in behind him from the church, but Caleb couldn't see him anywhere. He squatted, his back to the cave, and listened. Nothing except the mine shaft's greater silence. He faced it, stared, wondered if Raymond had gone in ahead, though he couldn't have because that was not the way he remembered it. He himself had gone in first because that was the way it had to be. He *had* to be in front. He *had* to be the one who lead the way.

Caleb looked at the arch the cave mouth made in the crumbling stone of the hill's side, realized for the first time how much like the bony ridge above an eye it seemed, grasses perched precariously above it, like an eyebrow. An old stunted tree, nearly dead, sat squat in the middle, only a single branch leaved in blue-green, its thousands of dried, flaking roots grabbing at the cave's edges like fingers prying open an orbless eye.

No time passed.

No sun, either.

The sky was noon-time bright, but not a single shaft of light fell to the ground.

When he finally heard something, it came from down the pathway, not from the way they'd walked those years ago, but from farther down the path, from the section of path leading, a sign had told them, to a spring steaming with mineral water, a recent addition to the park, evidence of the increasing volcanic processes, the sign said, at work beneath the Cascades. The something wasn't the sound of walking, but a snake-like slither, and a tap, and finally there appeared a man on a bicycle. He wore faded jeans, fake Indian moccasins with plastic soles, a checkered shirt. His curly hair rolled and pitched as he peddled no-handed at an impossibly gentle speed towards Caleb. He stopped, let the bike fall and gracefully stepped out of the way before it hit. Tiny pebbles slipped along the cliff, skittered across the path.

The man facing Caleb had no eyes. Just the dark sockets.

Caleb felt passive, but not helpless, as if it had all happened before. The man pointed at the mine shaft, and Caleb turned to look. Tiny orange particles floated in from the sides. He closed his eyes, then opened them to look at the man. He'd turned into Raymond, except for his eyes, which were still missing.

"Raymond!" he said. "Raymond! You made it back! You're here!"

Raymond said something as Caleb tried to approach him, and then he was gone. He hadn't understood the words, not the individual words, not the sentence. The orange specks returned at the mine shaft's mouth. Caleb's eyes began to hurt.

Despite the euphoria, he felt a cutting around the edges of his eyes, and an increasing pressure, as if they were being pulled out like wine corks. The orange dots were cutting, pulling and when they had finished, Caleb saw his eyes floating away

leaking tendrils and dark-ink-like blood—two bulbous squid swimming off. He could see them—with what he didn't know—but the seeing was impossibly acute. The orange dots had become galaxies. Orange galaxies. They spun everywhere, clumped into spheroid groups like bubbles from a sidewalk machine.

Then, he was on his knees on the pew, leaning over it, staring wildly at Raymond there, before him, holding on to his jacket, shaking him, saying, “Where have you been! Damn it! Where have you been!”

Raymond said something in an oddly pitched voice, in a language Caleb could not understand.

“Damn it, Raymond,” Caleb said. “Quit babbling! Say something I can understand!”

“Fish.” He heard the word, and once he understood it, the white tendrils began to recede, their place taken by vague, ghostly shapes, one of whom in a black hood leaned forward and spoke to him in Rachel's voice, saying something comforting, something peaceful. Caleb couldn't let go of Raymond's jacket, but he stopped shouting, and his headache returned. He let go, grabbed his head as if it were going to float away. He shook himself. He looked again at Raymond, only it wasn't Raymond. Too slight, the skin too pail, the hair, red.

“Michelle,” he said, and for a moment, again saw the orange galaxies, swirling in her hair, darting like a flock of swallows, like a school of fish, and then recede, tunneling through black space until they winked out, and with them, Caleb, too, was gone.

CHAPTER 11

SEVERAL DAYS AFTER Caleb woke up, and after forty-eight hours of drowsy argument with Michelle (off and on) about what he'd seen before he collapsed, Caleb's continued good spirits, regular habits, and lack of headaches finally convinced the doctors, his family and Michelle to relax, to allow a little more freedom, a little less medication. Michelle came in that afternoon bringing the sun with her. She opened the blinds, producing the striped effect Caleb liked, then pulled the blinds all the way up, brightening the room so intensely he had to close his eyes for a while.

"Aren't you afraid you'll give me a headache?" he said. "Don't you think all that light is the problem?"

"Whatever's wrong with you—"

"What *is* wrong with me?" He turned his head, following her footsteps.

"I don't know," Michelle said. "I'm not sure the doctors know. Your mother isn't saying anything, or your father either."

"If the doctors won't tell me," Caleb said. "It must really be bad."

"Or maybe they don't want to commit to an answer," Michelle said. "Malpractice and all."

"Still bad," Caleb said. He felt her weight on the bed, then felt her move away, heard the creak of the chair as she sat, leaned it back in its hind legs, put her feet up near his, as if they were on the deck of some cruise ship, looking across the vast expanses of

linoleum ocean to the door and aluminum sided mirror on the horizon. When Caleb felt her feet against his, he opened his eyes a little. They'd somehow gotten used to the brightness despite being closed.

"If you find out," Caleb said. "Will you tell me?"

"Yes," she said. "If only to convince you that you weren't looking into some *other realm* when you fell flat."

"I'm not convinced I was," Caleb said.

"You're not convinced you weren't," she said.

The room began to warm and Caleb shivered in the transition. Voices in the hall were as distant as the intercom and the blaring televisions in the next room. He began to feel as if he truly *were* on a cruise ship. He asked Michelle to open a window and she told him to do it himself, she was no longer going to put up with his catatonic helplessness. She smiled when she said this, and he smiled back, blinking back tears from the too bright light.

The air was cool and pleasant, slightly humid, slightly breezy, and the strain in his shoulders and arms (the window was one of those pull up kind) felt good. For the first time, he felt ready to get out of the room.

"I want to go for a hike," Caleb said. He grew tired, a little unsteady, slid back into bed, his feet joining Michelle's. "Soon, anyway."

"Let's plan it," Michelle said. She leaned as far back as possible in her chair, her eyes closed.

They listened to the voices, the intercom, the television, the low hum from heaters and air conditioners and tires on pavement floating in from outside, and then they had what had become, in Caleb's mind, *The Argument*. Both agreed that something had happened before Caleb's collapse, but exactly what that was and what they should think about it was where they differed. By that afternoon, with the sun and the open window, they'd gotten very sophisticated in their positions.

Caleb thought that human consciousness was something far too overdeveloped to be merely a survival mechanism, that it was possible to have competing versions of what it was humans were up to. In the same way they could see light as a wave and as a particle, both being models which depended on the need of the observer, couldn't they also see human consciousness as a wave and a particle? As a product and function of biology, and as an end in itself? Couldn't they see these two separate things as part of something larger, rather than as competing models having to displace one another? Couldn't he have connected to Raymond on some deep, intuitional level in some way as valid as a telephone call?

Rachel would have none of it. Speculation was fine, she said, but it wasn't something one should act on. What happened to him was a medical problem, and not a message from Raymond, nor a powerful intuitional experience, or a message from a mothership. Sure, it was fine imagining that it might be those things, but to act on that basis was worse than wish fulfillment. It was idiocy.

"But he's out there," Caleb said. "Hannah said so."

"He'll find *you*," Michelle said.

“Maybe I’m supposed to find him. Maybe that’s part of the deal.”

Michelle eased her chair level, took down her feet. She stood, stared out the window, twist a strand of her red curly hair.

“Just an excuse,” she murmured. “An irresponsible excuse.”

THE NEXT DAY was rainy and too chilly for an open window, at least as far as the nurse was concerned when she came in to check on things. Michelle shut it, and they were just beginning another round of the argument when Noah and Sheila came in to say goodbye. They hadn’t brought Becky and David who were out for a last ice skating trip with their Uncle Micah.

Sheila sat on Caleb’s bed and felt his forehead. He tried not to shudder at her touch and almost succeeded. “Still a little cold in here!” he said.

Noah stood behind Sheila trying not to look at anything. He finally wandered over to the window and stared into the parking lot. “A lot of expensive cars,” he mumbled.

“We owe you an apology,” Sheila said. “It wasn’t right of us to listen to hearsay, to guess at such things.”

“So,” Caleb said. “You don’t believe it happened?”

Sheila looked down. Noah didn’t seem to have heard the question. Michelle had made herself invisible next to the sink. She worried the handles, ran her finger around the rim. Caleb studied her face as Sheila tried to figure out an answer. It was clear to him that Michelle knew what they were talking about. Not a shred of confusion, or

surprise. She hadn't mentioned it. He didn't think she would mention it. He loved her more than he ever had at that moment, but she also scared him. He would now forever see it at the back of her mind regardless of what she thought, how she acted.

"We want you to come visit," Sheila finally said. "You can stay as long as you want."

"That's true," Noah said, finally looking at Caleb. "We'd like to get to know you, and the kids like you."

"They like Micah," Caleb said.

"They ask about you," Sheila said.

"Ask what?" Caleb said.

Sheila laughed. "Just the usual. How are you? When are you getting out? Do they stick you with needles?" Her hand was on Caleb's arm and as she talked she swung her head hard enough to jiggle the bed. His bed in that hospital was like a raft in the middle of a giant becalmed ocean, only now, a malevolent tangle of kelp had overwhelmed him. He almost laughed at the idea.

"We've got room," Noah said. "I can hook you up with a job, too."

"Michelle, too?" Caleb said.

"Oh," Noah said. He glanced at Michelle, as if seeing her for the first time. "I hadn't thought. . . ."

Michelle was staring at her finger nails, sometimes curling her hand to look at them, other times fanning her fingers out and fluttering them. Noah had stopped looking at her and had gone back to the window, fiddled with the blinds, finally opening them

wider. The light brightened the sheen on Michelle's hair, and as Caleb looked at it, he knew he wasn't going to visit, not ever, if possible. He felt a sickening wave, and flinched, something Sheila noticed. Her face, puzzled, backed away. She let go of his arm. Noah still stared out the window, Michelle at her hands, and Sheila at Caleb, hurt and puzzled

"Yes," Caleb said. "That sounds good."

Noah glanced at Caleb, a worried look on his face.

"What?" Caleb said. "I'm not getting out of here soon? I feel great!"

The four of them let the silence cover them. Caleb closed his eyes, leaned back. Some minutes later, a janitor pushed through the door, muttered excuses and apologies, bustled about the bathroom.

"Well," Noah said, looking at his wrist. He must have forgotten to put on his watch. "We need to get on the road."

"Thanks for stopping," Caleb said. "Really, it means a lot to me."

Sheila stood, smoothed her skirt. As soon as they left, Caleb watched the janitor's rubber gloves and giant sponge squishing and slopping over everything, glad of the cleaning.

DOCTORS VOICES WOKE Caleb the next day. They were standing just inside of the door, whispering in serious, solemn tones: about lunch or his condition, he couldn't at first tell. One of them, a youngish, tall man with oil slicked hair kept glancing at Caleb, his thin moustache twitching. Caleb sat up and they fell silent. The older man, Caleb's own

doctor, rubbed a hand over his bald head, cleared his throat and asked Caleb how he was doing.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Caleb said. “Do I have a tumor? Mad cow disease? I’m guessing it’s not just simple migraines, or I wouldn’t be here this long.”

“No,” the doctor said. “Not migraines. Or at least not *just* migraines.”

“What’s that mean?” Caleb said.

The younger man approached him, seemed about to say something, but the older man gestured to him and that was to be that. The man glanced around the room, took another look at Caleb. The older doctor told Caleb to get some more rest, to try and not think too much about things.

Michelle woke him up in the afternoon. She brought in a plant, watered it in the bathroom, and set it on the window’s ledge. It looked as if it had been growing for quite a while, with broad fleshy leaves hanging on several vines. She let one tendril fall to the floor, the other she propped up as best she could so that it would grow up the side of the window.

“Thought you might want a reminder of home,” Michelle said. “You remember home, don’t you? New York?”

She pulled the chair closer to the window and fingered the plant. Several times she was about to speak, as if she were ready to resume *The Argument*, but then she said nothing as loudly as possible. Caleb lay back, then turned on his side, put his hands under his head and watched her fingers tracing the edges of the leaves.

“What do you think is wrong with me?” Caleb said. “If it were a tumor, wouldn’t I feel the effects permanently? Feel *something*, anyway, even if it weren’t pain?”

“I really don’t know,” Michelle said. “I guess so.”

“And it can’t be psychological,” Caleb said, “or they wouldn’t keep me in here. I want to find out. I haven’t been bored around here, for some reason. When you’re not here, I turn off. You know, fall asleep at the drop of a hat.”

“That’s strange,” Michelle said. “Isn’t it?”

She glanced at him, at the plant. She sat upright in the chair, her shoulders slightly slumped forward, enough to throw her hair over the front of her shoulders.

“What’s the matter,” Caleb said.

“Just thinking,” Michelle said.

“You know, don’t you?” Caleb said. “Someone told you about what happened twelve years ago.”

She widened her eyes, fell back in the chair. “How could they not?” she said. “The rehearsal dinner, your tantrum, what it was about.”

“Raymond, right?”

“I’m worried about you, Caleb,” she said. She leaned forward, her hair in front of her face, lit by the window’s light.

“It didn’t happen,” Caleb said. “I can’t be affected by what didn’t happen.”

“I don’t care if nothing happened,” Michelle said. “That’s not the point. I just have this feeling that regardless, you’re going to find out. You’re obsessed with that sort of thing, aren’t you.”

“No,” Caleb said.

“You are,” Michelle said. “You love me because I was abducted, don’t you.”

“No,” Caleb said.

“Admit it,” Michelle said.

Caleb turned over, faced a row of switched off, free-standing monitors. “That’s not why I fell in love with you,” he said.

“I don’t think you’ll come back,” she said. “On my bad days, when I’m not here with you, when I’m sleeping in your bed in your little bedroom, I think you won’t go to New York, that you’ll run off like Raymond apparently did. Your whole life, for ten years, anyway, that’s what you’ve wanted to do.”

“Not true,” Caleb said, quietly.

“That’s what New York is,” she said. “Phase one.”

“No,” Caleb said.

“I’m scared,” she said. “You’re going to leave me. Either you’re going to die, or you’re going to disappear. One or the other.”

“That’s not true,” he said.

“Don’t forget to water the plant,” she said. Caleb heard the door swing shut behind. He lay there, watched the light ebb out of the room.

HANNAH HADN’T VISITED Caleb at all while he was in the hospital, not until Caleb’s last full day there, her last day in Portland. She and Bob and the twins were heading up to Vancouver to get the house ready for Gabriel’s visit—something to do with the television

series—and from there Hannah was going to continue the dig. Bob sat and talked to Caleb for a long time about what Canada was like, about the old days when they had lived in Eugene and Caleb used to come down and visit them before the twins were born. Bob still had his hippy beard, but his hair had thinned considerably, giving his face a bottom heavy effect. Hannah sat off to the side, not talking much, idly flicking the leaves on the plant Michelle had brought. She smiled a lot, looked secretive.

“Well,” Bob said, standing, glancing at Hannah. “Would you two like a chance to talk a little? I can make myself scarce—”

“No,” Hannah said.

“It’s okay,” Caleb said, though he really wanted to ask her to tell Raymond, if she saw him again, that Caleb was looking for him, needed to see him. Caleb was sure Raymond wanted to know, that they were ready to meet again. Instead, Caleb said nothing. Hannah leaned over to hug him, her hair smelling of wood smoke and shampoo.

“Well,” Bob said when Hannah stopped at the door. “I don’t know when we’ll see you again, you heading for New York and all.”

“Soon,” Caleb said.

They left. Whatever it was that had been making Caleb fall asleep when no one was in the room—maybe something in the food, maybe just his “condition,” whatever it was—seemed to have left with them. After they’d gone, he leaned back on his pillows, his arms behind his head, and felt *good*. He wanted to stand, move around. He wanted to get *out* of bed and walk around outside.

Then Hannah came back in. She stood in the doorway for a second or two, looking both ways as if avoiding Bob. She fumbled through her purse as she walked toward him, handed him a fumbled piece of binder paper. She touched his shoulder, smiled, rolled her eyes.

She touched the paper. “Don’t open that for ten minutes or so. Give me time to leave the building.”

“Okay,” Caleb said.

“Goodbye, Caleb,” Hannah said. “I love you.”

“Me, too,” Caleb said, but she was already gone.

He didn’t wait the ten minutes. He unfolded the paper. At first he saw only lines and numbers, and then realized she’d given him a map, and then he saw what the map represented, what lay under the X marking the end of the last blue line. The mine shaft.

WHEN CALEB’S MOTHER came in the next day, he was almost glad to see her, despite her sad eyes and the wistful, submissive way she looked at him.

“Caleb,” she said. “Are you all right? What are you doing up?”

“Shouldn’t I be?” Caleb said. He touched her shoulders with both hands, then let go and sat on his bed. “Doesn’t it seem strange that I sleep so much?” He slapped his legs, thumped his chest. “Whatever it is that’s wrong with me, it isn’t physical. Or at least it doesn’t feel physical. I don’t have a concussion, do I?”

“Caleb,” she said. “Let’s not talk about that. I brought you something to eat.”

She handed him a sack lunch. Tuna fish sandwich. A pear. His favorites. He ate like he was starving he hadn’t felt anything more than a slight emptiness.

“Mother,” he said. “I want to talk to the doctor. I want to know what they know about me. Something’s wrong, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“You need rest,” she said.

Caleb grabbed her wrist, held tightly. She tried to jerk away, twice, then relaxed.

“What’s the matter with you?” Caleb said. “Why are you like this? You’re so strange. Is it that I told Dad about the affair?”

She jerked away from Caleb again and this time he let her go. She went into the bathroom and pulled a paper towel out of the dispenser, brought it back to him. “Can you imagine what it’s like to see your son almost die?”

“Did I almost die?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But that’s what I thought. That’s what it felt like. And you were out for so long. A coma or death, either way—”

“But something’s bothering you now,” Caleb said. “I’m not dead. I’m not in a coma.”

She walked toward the blank monitors. Caleb had been taken off them since just after the first day he’d awakened, but they were still in the room, silent as tombstones, and as creepy. She leaned against one, which moved, startling her. She gave a little laugh, turned toward Caleb, then away. The room was shadowy; he hadn’t opened the window shades (having preferred to peer through the blinds between two fingers).

“In the church,” she said. “I had a premonition. I was sure you were never going to wake up.”

“But here I am.”

She looked toward him, but not at him, not at his eyes. She seemed huddled inward before him, cringing, almost, as if expecting him to hit her. He crumpled up the lunch bag, tossed it into the trash. The door opened, and in came Michelle.

“Hello!” she said. “I called work. They said I could have a couple more days, but not to press my luck.”

“That’s good,” Caleb said.

“Yes,” his mother said.

Caleb opened his arms, hugged Michelle tightly when she came to him. He glanced at his mother. “I was just trying to convince my mother to let the doctors tell me whatever it is they have to tell me.”

“You should,” Michelle said, letting Caleb go and facing his mother. “He’s twenty-five. He has a right to know.”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea,” Ruth said.

“We’re going,” Caleb said. “Right now.” He was wearing pajamas and even though it was a hospital, he didn’t want to face the music undressed. His mother had packed a few clothes for him and they were still in the bathroom under the sink.

The doctor, the bald man whom he’d seen once or twice a day for electrode tests or chart checking, nodded to Caleb when they entered his office. Ruth took a seat at one end of his desk and Michelle and Caleb sat near the other end. The doctor said that he

quite frankly had no real idea what was wrong with him. He'd had a strange sleeping pattern, until recently, and as far as he could tell Caleb had strange responses to hunger and pain, as if he were selectively paralyzed when he wanted to be. He showed Caleb with a test. He had Caleb look at his index finger, and then he stuck it gently with a pin. "Ouch," Caleb said.

"Okay," the doctor said. "Look away."

Caleb looked at Ruth, who seemed about to throw up. He could feel the doctor holding his finger.

"Well?" Caleb said.

"You didn't feel it?" the doctor said.

"No," Caleb said.

The doctor told him to feel the pin, to expect it, to concentrate on feeling it. Caleb concentrated. "Ouch!" he said. "Once was enough!"

Ruth closed her eyes. The doctor let go of Caleb's hand. Michelle stared wide eyed at him. "You felt something?" she said.

"Five short jabs," Caleb said, staring at his unmarked finger.

"We can't explain it," the doctor said.

"He didn't do anything," Michelle said.

"It's as if you've got complete conscious control over your nervous system. Or could have. Your body is responding more or less out of habit rather than condition or natural processes."

"I don't believe it," Caleb said.

“I’m speaking metaphorically,” the doctor said. “Something interesting happened in your brain. We’re not sure what.” He showed Caleb a bunch of slides on a wall-mounted, back lit board, slices of his skull scanned just after he arrived the night of the wedding. He pointed to a bright, white area of Caleb’s brain surrounded by yellow, then orange, fading eventually to blue. Then he showed him in his computer, a moving version of the picture which looped, the bright spot growing and shrinking as the slicer moved along his head.

“We don’t know what that is,” the doctor said.

“It’s not a tumor?” Michelle said.

“No,” the doctor said.

“How can you be so sure?” Caleb said.

“We took a lot of pictures like this,” the doctor said, “before you woke up.”

“That’s right,” Ruth said. “I remember. Horrible machine.”

The doctor pressed a few keys, made a few mistakes, swore, then brought up a movie: about five or six of those scans spliced together. In each one, the whiteness, at its height, seemed to lessen until the last segment, when it was nearly gone.

“As far as we can tell short of surgery,” the doctor said, “is that whatever it was that was there is gone.”

Caleb looked at Michelle. As far as he was concerned, he had won *The Argument*. She looked so sad, so concerned, he didn’t want to tell her. Almost felt that she would believe it, and that believing it would be no comfort. Ruth’s eyes were scrunched halfway closed, as if someone had struck her.

“That’s the visual cortex,” Ruth said.

“It is,” the doctor said.

“So he was dreaming,” Ruth said.

“There’s no evidence of that,” the doctor said.

“I don’t remember anything, Mother,” Caleb said. “Not past the church, anyway.”

Ruth shrugged, lifted a hand to her mouth, and then her face resolved into the drugged tranquility she fell into at moments of stress. “If you weren’t dreaming,” she said, pointing at the brightness, “then that’s the result of a dream. The aftershock.”

“Don’t be silly,” Caleb said. “You’re not qualified.”

“I’d like to know who is,” the doctor said. “Frankly, we’re at a loss. As far as we can tell, what you’ve got going on in there is some sort of epileptic neural stimulation.”

“Is that possible?” Caleb said.

The doctor shrugged.

“So,” Caleb said. “What’s the prognosis?”

He shrugged again.

“Are you hoping for a Nobel prize?” Caleb said.

“Caleb,” Ruth said, standing suddenly, grabbing his arm. “Don’t be rude.”

“Does this mean I might die at any moment?” Caleb said.

“There’s no evidence of that,” the doctor said, but he still held the needle in his hand. Later, which Caleb stood at the front desk while his mother filled out forms for his

release, he thought about what the doctor had not said. There was no evidence that he could die at any moment, but there was no evidence that he *wouldn't* die.

CALEB HAD BEEN warned not to drive, to stay in bed as much as possible. He did not want to drive, and once home, he'd felt tired much of the days and nights, preferred to stay in his room while his family moved about like, he had fun imagining, giant mice in the walls. On his second day back, he was sitting on his bed with Michelle when a huge and dangerous sounding thud startled them. They'd been sitting on his bed pinching his blanket into odd shapes, making a game out of it, though Caleb wasn't quite sure of the rules. She was going to have to go back to New York in only a few days, or lose her job. Neither of them seemed to acknowledge the fact. He was going to have to make a decision, she would be hurt no matter what it was. And he too.

Then the thud. Loudly from the hall, Leah, said, "Okay, that's the last suitcase. What the hell did you put in that damn thing anyway, Lloyd! My make-up?" She guffawed in large "huh huhs" and then stepped into Caleb's room.

"What the hell are you doing in bed?" she said as she approached him open armed. Michelle slid out of the way quickly, but not before she smoothed out the blanket as if erasing the key to their private code. Leah wore a large white cotton dress dotted with pale pink roses. She'd pulled her hair back in a severe bun and tiny short-haired spirals stuck up like stray grass on a mown lawn. "You look healthy to me," she said. "Damn healthy!"

She hugged Caleb tightly, his chest pressed against her breasts, her forearms squeezing the breath out of him.

“Mm,” he said. “It was all for a hug like that.”

“What a charmer!” she said.

“Oh, God,” Michelle said. She laughed and left the room.

“I guess it *would* be heavy,” Caleb said, “because you never wear makeup.”

“That’s true,” Leah said. “What’s the point?” She let go of him and then looked out the window, pressing her head against the right side trying to see Lloyd’s truck in the street.

“I’m glad you’re married, now,” Caleb said. “I’m really sorry about the ceremony.”

Lloyd padded into the room, sat down where Michelle had been and held out his hand. Caleb took it. Callused, and oddly angled. He felt as if he were holding on to the business end of a gardening tool.

“We don’t mind you stealing the show,” Lloyd said.

“Not at all,” Leah said. She ruffled Lloyd’s hair. Caleb let go of his hand.

“From my perspective,” Caleb said, “it was a *great* show. Sordid, compared to yours.”

“At least you didn’t drool,” Leah said.

“We were out the door, anyway,” Lloyd said.

“The reception was a bit strained,” Leah said.

“Not that we minded,” Lloyd said. “We had a ping pong tournament in your honor. No one felt much like dancing.”

“You’re kidding,” Caleb said.

“We’re kidding,” Lloyd said.

“It’s all over now, anyway,” Leah said.

And that was that. Lloyd stood up, tenderly touched Leah on her hip. She smiled at him, looked him straight in the eye, and then they moved to the door and were gone. Caleb listened to them thud down the stairs—they were both heavy walkers—heard their feet on the entryway tiles. The front door opened, shut, and the house fell silent. Totally silent. His mother was out, and so were Rachel and Halsey, whom he hadn’t seen since just after he woke up. Micah, also gone. No one knew where. Caleb hadn’t seen him since the wedding. Michelle must have been somewhere in the house. She wouldn’t have gone without telling him. He lay down, stared at the corner above his bed, the bluegray walls, felt as if he had never left that room, not since he was a child.

He got up, shuffled around on the top shelf of his closet and found it. Not even dusty. He had packed it carefully when he was younger, in tissue paper, and then in a plastic bag. He shook it out, hung it from the hook still there beside his closet door. Raymond had made it for Caleb’s first day on Earth: abstract wire and string, no string the same length, no wire the same length or curve or width.

THREE DAYS OUT of the hospital, Caleb awoke restless. In the late morning, the house was again deserted except for Michelle, who was in the shower. He headed downstairs

for the herb garden, where he sat on the bench, enjoying the heat of the sun on his neck and shoulders, the slight chill the wind brought out on his scalp. Presently, Michelle joined him. She sat down and took a deep breath, shook out her wet hair. “I don’t think I’ll ever get sick of thyme,” she said.

“It keeps on ticking away at your senses, eh?” Caleb said.

“Ha ha,” she mocked.

Caleb reached into his pocket and pulled out the notebook paper Hannah had given him. “Look,” he said.

She took the paper, examined it.

“It’s the mine shaft,” he said. “The place where Raymond and I went on my thirteenth birthday.” He explained to her what he thought had happened, the strange geometries, the candle and the oak tree and all the rest. He explained what Noah and Sheila had made of his change after that moment, what Leah had said. He wondered if maybe his epilepsy, or whatever it was, had first happened at that moment, that in the end, it was as simple and meaningless as that: random static electricity.

“Do you believe that?” she said.

“Why not?” he said.

“You don’t,” she said. “Even if you did, you’d believe the other, too, that it was mystical.”

“What’s the harm?”

She gave him back the map, stood, held on to the bird feeder and leaned out, shaking her wet hair.

“I can’t drive,” Caleb said. “I need you to take me there.”

“No,” she said.

“I need to go there.”

“I’m not going to do it.”

“Michelle,” he said. “I’ll go with or without you.”

She pulled her hair aside, let it drip into the dirt. “Okay,” she said. “But I think you’re going to die if you go up there.”

“I won’t.”

They planned to leave on in two days, the day before she had to go back to New York. She was businesslike in the planning, figuring how she was going to rent a car for the occasion, how he was going to resurrect his mother’s credit card, how they would slip out in the early morning before anyone noticed, how they would have to pack some food the night before.

“It’ll be a picnic,” Caleb said. “It’ll be fun.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Michelle said, just before she ran into the house.

That night, Caleb dreamed about the man with the bicycle, the dark holes for eyes, a black sky, a terrain lit as if by the parking lot light at Lake Shasta, a flat neighborhood not at all like the one his parents lived in, or that he or Michelle lived in back in New York. He waited by a curb, staring at a drinking fountain, very thirsty but afraid to drink. He waited for a long time, walking back and forth, feeling as if at any moment he was going to feel a chill. The man showed up wearing cut offs, riding a

racing, ten-speed bike with super thin tires. He skidded to a halt in front of Caleb and then stared at him.

Then he woke up, Michelle curled around him. He watched the numbers on his red clock: 2:31, then 2:32. He glanced at the mobile, still moving, barely glinting red. This time, there was no headache, no warning. The room disappeared in a blanket of deep red. He felt something hot flash through him, saw lightning like static arc across his field of vision, and then he was gone.

CHAPTER 12

A BREEZE STRUCK Caleb's face, his stomach swelled and rolled, the sun beat down on his cold skin without warmth. He was on a boat, rough planked, rolling in the ocean, a giant gray-green carpet stretching from one end of the domed sky to the other. He wore a long coat, with epaulettes, like a French Marshall, the fringe flapping about his ears. A mast loomed, shreds of old sail hung down, blocking the sun. He got up. The boat, at first a life raft, was now a long whaling skiff, and then became something larger, a two master. Caleb walked up a long ramp to the stern where the wheel should have been and found instead two giant oars anchored to the deck with ropes. He grabbed one, leaned into it, pushed toward the center of the deck.

"Why are you turning the boat?" someone said. Micah was beside him, holding the other oar. "Look around you," he said. He swept his arm against the colorless horizon. "What are we steering toward?"

"I don't know," Caleb said. "What difference does it make? A turn is as good as a straight line."

Micah jumped up, came down far too slowly, as if gravity were not the same for him as it was for Caleb.

Caleb pulled his oar parallel with Micah's, found a rope, looped it round and tied the ends to rings in the deck. Micah had gone to midship. Caleb watched him climb the rigging, saw the flash of a knife, a new, white, billowing sheet fall and fill. Micah clung

to the railing, his white shirt flapping like the sail, his hair whipping in the wind. He held his hand above his forehead, peered into the distance. The sun was low, the black rigging, the white sail colored orange-red. Caleb sat down cross-legged, felt the deck plates sag beneath him. He lowered his head, wrapped his hands around the back of his neck, closed his eyes, and when he lifted them again he heard sea gulls and was atop the tallest mast, his legs wrapped tightly around two horizontal poles, his arm around the mast itself. The ship was too small beneath him, as out of proportion as a pool from the high dive. The ocean glowed deep green and beneath that a deep blue, and dolphins leaped in the ship's wake. Caleb was scared. He hung on while the ship rocked side to side, and once in a while, forward and backward. He shivered uncontrollably. Micah stood on the mast just below him, his arms stretched in a high wire pose, his shirt now too large, a sail in its own right hanging from his outstretched spars.

"There's nothing to fear," he said.

"This is a dream," Caleb said. "Static electricity in my brain."

"Perhaps," Micah said. He jumped, kicked the mast Caleb was sitting on, then jumped a little farther out. "Come out here," he said. "You won't fall."

"I'll fall," Caleb said. Caleb wanted to see his face. There was something interesting about his face. Micah looked out to sea, showing Caleb only tangled hair.

Micah pointed, swung his arm around and the ship described a long, slow arc. The dolphins anticipated their direction, predicted the ship's course and raced to meet its future self. Caleb turned to Micah, whose staring white face was as smooth as a child's,

his nostrils tiny dark holes, the skin around his eyes dark-shadowed, cold, his eyes black.

His face was made of porcelain, not a moment of history written on it. A new face.

“Who are you?” Caleb said.

Micah walked calmly, his arms pressed to his sides, to the end of the mast and dove a long too-slow fall, his shirt fluttering, his arms against his torso, his head bare to the waves. He plunged into the water too serenely for a splash and before the waves swallowed him his feet became a dolphin’s tail. A swarm of flying fish leaped over the ship. A dragonfly touched down on Caleb’s knee. Invisible sea gulls barked and laughed. The dragonfly lifted off his knee as carefully as a helicopter, flew toward his face, floated before him. Caleb wanted to swat him away, but he was scared. He lowered his head, closed his eyes, and when he lifted them again he was at the ship’s prow.

LAND AHEAD. A hump of rock, a block of land worn down by time topped by a crust of green smudges and black stands. Another appeared some twenty degrees to the left, and then, as if the mist were lifting, the sky deepened into blue and islands appeared, dotting the seas around, as if whales had come to persuade them to join their migration. The ship, of its own accord, followed the leaping dolphins through the archipelago.

Halsey behind Caleb in a dark evening suit, the tux he’d worn at Leah and Lloyd’s wedding.

“Halsey!” Caleb said, moving towards him, reaching for his hand.

Halsey stepped aside to let him pass. Caleb leaned over the railing. They passed an island, perhaps the largest, a jagged center of an enormous volcanic explosion. Ridge after jagged ridge receded up the mountain, the balconies and walls of which were riddled with black hole caves. Thousands of white birds bulletted from the sky and spread wings to land.

“Wyoming is a beautiful state,” Halsey said. “Don’t you think so?”

“You’re not Halsey,” Caleb said. “Who are you?”

“Not at all like this,” Halsey said. He took off his jacket and dropped it into the ocean where it slipped past the hull, and then he dropped another jacket. He was still wearing one, the third.

Caleb lowered his head, shut his eyes, waited for something to change, the pressure, the soundscape, but the distant birds barked as they had before, the wind was as it had been. When he lifted his head, he was next to the oar he’d tied down earlier. Halsey held Micah’s while Caleb untied his oar and pushed it aside, hoped the boat would swing around. The mountain beside them began to shift.

Halsey laughed, then bore down heavy on the oar. The mountain shifted around the ship, moving prow-ward. He smiled, but his face was as impassive and porcelain as Micah’s had been. He leaned over his side of the ship, his legs on the rail, his arms outstretched, pushing the oar at an impossible angle.

Caleb let go his oar. They were aimed at and fast approaching the mountainous island’s sheer cliff walls. Caleb closed his eyes, spun himself around, and was atop the crow’s nest again. Halsey was gone. In his place a row of white birds perched along the

oar's handle, another row along Caleb's. The birds cooed like pigeons, but were as large as turkeys and had huge, hooked beaks.

The mast swayed as much as it had in the deep ocean, but Caleb stood anyway, still scared, and then he leaped into the foam curling between the rock wall and the ship's hull, hitting the water just before the two met.

THE JERK OF the nervous system, like gulping air after a long time underwater. When Caleb opened his eyes he saw nothing, the sky dark as his eyelids, the ground at his back springy and uneven. Then the stars came out. Millions of them coalescing into a milky stream. Caleb was spread-eagled. Above him Orion swung, the three stars of his belt like the hand of a clock. He stood. A figure moved into his field of vision wearing a cowl darker than the night sky. Caleb looked around it. They were in the middle of a plain. No features, only the stars and the starlit dull, blue-gray grass, clumped as if pressed flat, the stalks only now beginning to lift themselves.

"Night's possibility," the figure said. A woman.

"Who are you?" Caleb said. He stared straight up and when he turned around, the figure was gone and the stars fell, turning into snow, the clumped grass into hills and valleys, the valleys filling faster than could be explained by the white flutter. Caleb took a bearing by the three stars, followed them like an arrow, imagined they pointed toward the milky way. He could not tell if he was moving. Even his footsteps in the snow filled before he could complete the next step. But the stars remained the same. He walked until the hooded figure appeared and pulled the cowl away from her face.

“Mother?” Caleb said.

“Caleb,” she said. She shivered, blew on her white hands. Her fingernails were blue, as were her lips, her eyes enormous, her cheeks drawn into hollows above her narrow chin, and her eyes drooped more than ever.

“Caleb,” she said. “It’s too cold, here, Caleb.”

“I can’t feel it,” Caleb said.

“Let’s go back to the house,” his mother said. “It’s too cold out here. You’ll catch your death.”

She reached for him, touched his face, her fingers warm, almost hot, but they looked frozen. She trembled and shuttered, snatched her hand back to blow across the fingers. Steam rose from her mouth, seeming to speed upwards against the falling snow. Caleb sat down, wiggled into the snow. His mother continued to blow on her hand, and then she raised her other hand, and then a third and a fourth. Something red sparked in her eyes, then an orange fire broke out, burned her eyes, turned them into black ash. She grew very large. She stopped shivering and trembling and blowing on her hands. She loomed over Caleb, blocking out the light of the edge-on galaxy, her robe stretching, as if the world were dawning black sky.

FULL SUN. CALEB brushed the sand from his T-shirt and pants.

“You okay?” Leah said.

She wore a white muumuu-like robe, a big floppy white hat, dark sunglasses. She took a drag off of her cigarette holder, blew the smoke into the dull sky and put her other hand on her hip. “I’ve been waiting,” she said. “Come on.”

The horizon was as featureless ahead, but behind him a huge, dark blue, mile wide river plowed through the sand, a hint of yellow desert like an aura on the other side. Caleb turned back to Leah, who didn’t seem to have half the trouble Caleb did trudging through the sand.

They hiked. They kept on hiking. Nothing gave off shadows, even when they reached some low hills, crested them, descended into a shallow valley. A hint of redness, and then an assertion, and then the crunch beneath their feet of a million shards of red clay, the ancient pots, broken, at first, turning newer as they progressed, until they became brand new, just a hint of dust in their bottoms, and as they approached another set of low hills ahead of them, the pots filled with water and on the surface, white blossoms like hands upturned to the sky.

“Who are you?” Caleb said.

The Leah woman said nothing.

Abruptly, as the base of the enormous ash heap ahead of them, the diagonals of red pots stopped. They climbed. At the top of the hill they looked into a valley even lower than the one they’d come from, and in the center, three pyramids. The Egyptian pyramids.

Caleb hooked the laces of his shoes together, slung them over his shoulders, and in ten or twelve steps, was between the monuments, the sides, smooth as a sidewalk, the

lines between the blocks rippling and shading as he walked slowly along. He found the great pyramid, stared up the smooth sides, unable to tell if the point where the stone met the sky was the top or the horizon. On a whim, he moved to the smallest one, off center from the others, and stood at the side. He touched a stone and found himself in a dark room lit by shafts of light high up on the wall.

BIRDS. THOUSANDS OF them. He opened his eyes, found that the room had become the thickets of grass at the beginning of a vast plain under an enormous cloud-stacked sky. The grass, tall and waving, carpeted the horizon in every direction, broken only by tall pillars of rock at regular intervals. He followed the sound of clinking, metal on rock until he found Hannah digging in a square of rich dark soil. She had a large bag of pine cones at her side, and a giant tin can of water.

“Hello, Caleb!” she said. “I could use some help.” She handed him a trowel. “I’m planting a forest,” she said, and dropped a cone into a hole, covered it, tamped it down, poured water on it, moved twelve yards away and started over. Caleb helped with the digging. Already the cones pushed through the soil, sprouted and grew at a terrific rate. Soon, they were in the middle of a giant forest. “Look,” she said, pointing above them. High up, too high up for much detail, they saw platforms along the bowls of trees, and bridges connecting them, and something moving and fluttering. The trees had grown so high they could no longer see the branches in the gathering mist. They walked out of the forest, leaned against one of the monoliths, a roughly rectangular piece of granite.

The breeze had disappeared and a mist descended the long trunks, bleeding onto the plain from somewhere in the middle of the forest. And then it was night.

“Ah,” Hannah said. “Night’s possibility!”

“Who are you?” Caleb said.

BLACK WALLS, BLACK floor, black ceiling. Gray flimsy card table. Caleb’s hands folded together, resting on the edge, his back against a metal chair. Hands folded, wearing a dark suit, Sheila sat in front of him, his eyes gone, half obscured by bangs.

“Wake up,” Sheila said. She reached across the table, grabbed Caleb’s left hand, pulled him across until he lay with his head over the other edge. She punched him in the back, then brought his arm down like a club. She pulled him up, threw him across the room. His right shoulder compressed against the rough wood, the black planks. They cracked, letting in a little light. Sheila pulled him up by his shoulders and threw him against the table. Caleb crushed it, felt the corners and splinters stab at his abdomen.

Sheila’s eyes were gaping pits. She pulled at Caleb’s legs, raked him across the table’s remains, knocked his head against a wall. The room shook. Dust fell from the rafters. Each plank separated a little from the others, letting in ribbons of light.

IN THE DARK, he saw nothing, felt nothing. Then a strain in his legs. Red and green lightening in the space before him. Gravel. He was sitting on gravel. The air was still, a thick, humid moistness looming, hovering. Not a sound, not even his own breathing.

The red and green lighting turned into a white wire diagram against a black background:

a round table, two chairs, two people sitting on them, a man, a woman, above them an umbrella as if they were at a resort. On the table, two tall glasses, two tiny umbrellas.

They receded into the distance, and then came back. Receded and came back, over and over. Slowly, they became an oak tree, then the mobile hanging in a corner.

He felt a hand on his knee, the slightest of touches. The hand moved. Ticklish against the fine hairs on his leg. The hand reached the hem of his shorts, a finger slipped under.

Caleb stood, his hands pressing against the ceiling, his feet burning from the sharp pain of a thousand pull-tabs. Still, he could see nothing, hear nothing.

THE PLANT HAD taken over the hospital room, grew along the window seal, the floor, across in close-line fashion from the bathroom towel racks to the unplugged machines behind him, along the headboard. Fleshy leaves covered the door, carpeted the floor. Caleb lay there, wondering at the bluish quality of the light burning through the slitted blinds.

Movement, and then a shape arose from chair covered in leaves and vines. Michelle turned to face him, her eyes completely gone, the ends of her hair dark, as if her roots had only just recently began to turn red.

“This is what spins away, Caleb,” she said. She lifted her hands as if offering the leaves and vines that hung from her arms to the ceiling. “All of it,” she said. “What spins away.”

CHAPTER 13

WHEN CALEB WOKE up, he was in the hospital room again, and though the vines and fleshy leaves were no longer there, Michelle was. When he realized she was holding his hand, he jerked back, felt her lean forward, touch his knee. Slowly, he moved his legs away until he could no longer feel the pressure of her weight on the bed.

“You’re back,” she said.

“Why did they bring me here?” he said.

“You didn’t wake up,” she said. “Seven o’clock on the morning and there I am, shaking you, and you don’t wake up. What were we supposed to do?”

“You heard the doctor.”

She leaned back, looked away. The blinds were closed, and around them were drawn sheer curtains, the only thing that had changed, but despite the double barrier, the sun seemed determined to fill the room, pressing through the blinds in thin strips, illuminating the curtains into a white aura.

“What’s wrong with you?” Michelle said.

“Some sort of epilepsy thing,” Caleb said. “You were there.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She leaned forward, reached for his arm. Caleb jerked back. She stared at him, her mouth drawn to one side, her forehead wrinkled. She had dark circles under her eyes, her freckled skin pale and sickly.

“You’ve got to help me get out of here,” Caleb said. He sat up, smoothed the blankets over his bare legs. A wave of weakness hit him and for a moment he could see nothing but green and red lightening. When he could see again, Michelle was standing next to the bathroom, her hands wet. Time had passed, but the light pressing through the window hadn’t changed.

“I had strange dreams,” he told her. “You wouldn’t believe how vivid they were.”

She walked toward the window, stared into the light. Caleb was close enough to her to see the orbs of her eyes, clear at the edge, then falling into light blue. There seemed to be two orbs, the one on the outside, clear and light blue, the one inside, darker blue, white, and in the center, a tiny black dot.

“You were there,” Caleb said. “You had no eyes.”

She looked at him.

“This has something to do with Raymond, doesn’t it?” she said. “You’re going to tell me those dreams were a message, that you have to go look for him.”

He wasn’t going to tell her that. He was going to tell her about the pyramids, the snow, the giant forest, how Sheila beat him up. He wanted to laugh with her about it. But she was right. Either the dream was meaningless brain dysfunction, or the deepest levels of intuition. For Caleb, there was no real choice.

“I have to find out what happened,” he said.

“If he molested you?” she said. “What difference will that make?”

“None,” Caleb said. He tapped his head. “I think he did this to me. Gave me this.”

Michelle rolled her eyes. She flicked at the curtains, then turned and faced the bathroom. He stared at her curly hair draped over her thin shoulders, at the place where her arms left her T-shirt sleeves, the skin as pale and faintly freckled as her face.

“You’ve got to get me out of here,” Caleb said. “Can you help me up?”

“Are you sure you want me to touch you?” Michelle said.

“We’ve got that hike in a couple of days,” Caleb said. “I want to get up and exercising.”

“It’s tomorrow,” Michelle said.

“Tomorrow?”

She took hold of his hands and guided him into a sitting position, his legs dangling over the edge of the bed. He felt the air tickling his damp leg hairs. “You’ve been out for a day and a half,” she said.

He felt a wave of dizziness hit him and when it cleared, he was again on his back, staring at the porous ceiling. Michelle was there, in the chair, her head on her hands, her hair draped over.

“Even if you have to carry me,” Caleb said. “Get me out of here.”

“No,” Michelle said. She faced him, stared down at him. She had been crying, her nostrils and eyes red. “I don’t think I can take more of this, Caleb. I seriously don’t think it’s in me to deal with this.” Tears welled in her eyes. She turned, rushed out the door.

The room grew quiet, not even the sound of voices in the hall, or disturbed car alarms in the lot. After a minute or two of struggling to get out of bed, Caleb lay back, became aware of a tiny, rhythmic sound, a sort of shallow panting mixed with an ultra high pitched whine. Eventually, he located it on one of the machines next to his bed. On two spindly legs ending in a vacuum cleaner base sat a small steel monitor, the screen black except for a tiny red blinking cursor.

IT SEEMED TO Caleb that he had slept for hours, thankfully without dreams, but he couldn't tell as there were no clocks in the room, and the sunlight seemed as if it were trying to press through the blinds and curtains by sheer willpower. He felt stronger, eased his legs around and let them drape over the bed's edge. He sat still, waited for the dizziness to come. It didn't come.

"Good to see you up!" Micah said. He'd been standing next to the row of machines.

"Have you been here all this time?" Caleb said. "Did Michelle send you in?"

"Haven't seen her," Micah said.

Caleb eased himself off the bed, walked unsteadily toward the bathroom. He glanced back at Micah, who was watching him intently, a look of distant concern on his face. "Don't worry," Caleb said. "I won't ask you to hold my hand." He laughed, but Micah didn't seem to have heard him. Caleb found that he had to sit on the toilet in order to get his pants on. While he dressed, Micah told him that their mother was cooking

dinner that night, that he and Rachel and Halsey were sharing a flight to Denver and would leave later on.

“You’ve got to help me get out of here,” Caleb said.

“Okay,” Micah said. “I didn’t notice any armed guards.”

Caleb tied his shoes, while Micah pulled aside the sheer curtains, pulled open the blinds. Light poured into the room. Caleb could barely see Micah, who had become a shadow hugged by the light.

“Much better,” Caleb said.

Within minutes, they were on the road, Micah driving the Mercedes. The first thing Caleb noticed was that there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, that the blue dome seemed polished smooth, that it had a transparent quality to it even in the afternoon, as if without much strain, they might see through to the stars. The streets were impossibly black, the sidewalks white, each car: white, silver, maroon, black, forest green, glowed under coats of clear finish, rolled like beaded liquid along the freeway. Ivy, each leaf like a tiny, dark green hand, waved in the wakes of cars, lined the sides of roads, black telephone wires swooped and leaped from pole to pole. As they approached their neighborhood, the sky seemed to grow a little darker, and the houses, the broad Tudor faces, the clunky medieval towers, the ornate, asymmetrical Victorians, flashed fiery reflections from windows, mailboxes and weather veins.

“I never realized,” Caleb mumbled.

“I thought you were dead,” Micah said. “I heard Michelle scream, and I thought you were dead, lying there.”

Caleb glanced at Micah, who seemed as porcelain beneath his mirrored sunglasses as he had been in his dream. “I had a dream,” he said. “We were on a tall ship. I clutched at the mast, deathly afraid of falling, and you dove off. You turned into a dolphin.”

“And while Halsey and I carried you out to the car,” Micah said, “after we found out you were still breathing, I knew that even if you were dead, if you had died, it would never affect me like John did.”

“You were brave,” Caleb said. “That long slow dive into the ocean. The green ocean. You know, all I could do was close my eyes.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Micah said. “It just struck me that no one’s death, not even my own, would matter as much as that first one.”

“Splash,” Caleb said. “Only the tiniest, as if you were born for the water. You should have seen it.”

“I guess it’s no big deal,” Micah said. “But it was a revelation to me. I mean, *I* had never thought like that before.”

They neared the top of the hill, passed their father, Gabriel, walking briskly down the sidewalk. Their house, as the pulled into the driveway, seemed the largest one on the block, the glass window-tower like a burning torch catching the late afternoon sun. They sat for a while in the driveway, listening to the car settle, the rapidly decreasing ticks, the barely perceptible sigh of a stiff breeze testing the windows and hood.

“You know what I’m going to do?” Micah said. “I’m going to put you in my next novel.”

“I don’t think that would be a good—”

Micah slapped the dashboard, pushed open the door and almost jumped onto the driveway. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do,” he said. “I’m going to put you in my next novel and I’m going to save your life. I’m going to save your sorry ass!”

CALEB RESTED ON the living room couch enjoying the seven shafts of light through the seven gothic windows marching upstairs. Jacob’s Ladder, he thought. The seven noble truths. Or was that the eightfold path? Four noble truths? He had forgotten everything Raymond had taught him, or, at least, he told himself, he had forgotten the letter of what he’d been taught. The house was silent, seemed even quieter because of the faint gusts of wind against the windows. His mother had gone to the store for some last minute supplies, taking Micah along as chauffeur, and although Halsey and Rachel had made much of his return, he hadn’t seen them since they had passed him on the way to the kitchen. And Michelle was nowhere to be found. She had told no one anything, and despite the fact that he had been worried about her earlier, he found that the silence and the windows and the gusts of wind drove all concern from him. She had taken her rental car and gone for a drive. Or, Caleb thought, she had driven to the airport, paid extra for a ticket and gone home. Perhaps she was still at the airport, waiting for him to chase her down. He thought that time outside the Guggenheim—it seemed lifetimes ago, now—and how he had guessed that she had wanted him to follow her into the museum, and how he had been unable to almost as if her need had caused the resistance. For a moment, he missed the snow, but then the feeling passed.

Somewhere behind him, he heard a muffled sound, and then something faint, like the sound of the water pipes back in his New York apartment between the moment when he turned on the tap, and the moment when the water blasted out. He closed his eyes, promised himself he would keep them closed, rest up for the next day. If Michelle was going to help him go into the mountains, he'd have to get up early enough to take his mother's car before she woke up. Presently, someone touched his shoulder. He jerked away, sat up quickly, his heart beating so fast and hard the room seemed to pulse.

"Sorry," Halsey said. The man stood before him, tall and husky and blond, a drawn expression across his mouth. "Thought you were asleep."

Behind him, in the kitchen, Caleb heard a low, moaning sound, like the song of his New York neighbor singing to her baby. "Is that Michelle in there?" Caleb said. "Is she crying?"

"Rachel," he said. "Can you help me with her?"

Caleb followed Halsey into the kitchen, then ducked into the nook, where Rachel sat Hannah liked to sit. She leaned against the window, tapping it with her knuckles. Her face was red, her eyes puffy, her hair, held back by her small ear, hung lank and stringy over her shoulder. She sniffed, whimpered, but didn't look at Caleb, who, opposite her, also leaned against the window.

"Have you guys been smoking again?" Caleb said.

"No," Halsey said.

"That's not it," Rachel said. "I can't see the shapes anymore."

"What shapes?"

While Halsey went to find a box of tissues, Rachel explained in her phlegmy, halting voice, that when she worked, and even when she didn't, shapes turned in her mind. Like some people always heard music, as if from far off, and in the everyday sounds they encountered, she saw shapes, relationships, configurations which helped her in her theoretical work in school. And now, when she had finally begun to gain the kind of background she needed in order to put her ability to work, she apparently lost it. Halsey was taking his time with the tissue box, and after a moment, Rachel leaned across the table.

"At first I thought it was the dope," she said. "That's why I quit. But now, I think it's something else."

Caleb leaned back, stared at the wooden bench back behind Rachel, where it met the stucco wall. For twenty years the wood had sustained nicks and scrapes and Ruth had finally resorted to painting it every years in thick, blue, enamel paint until the dents and gashes looked like the scars of long ago chicken pox.

"The thing is," Rachel said, startling him. "I think I know what it is, now. I'm pregnant."

Caleb stared. He said nothing. Rachel leaned against the window, and though she continued to sniff, she no longer whimpered or cried. "Maybe it's something to do with hormones," she said. "Maybe once this is over, I'll be okay."

Caleb took Rachel's wet and sticky hand, held it in his until she shook it loose. Except for the sniffles, she went over her options without emotion. Abortion, adoption,

quitting school, putting it off, getting married. Halsey had asked her, though he didn't know about the pregnancy yet.

"I do now," he said, pushing his way through the curtain to sit beside Caleb. He stretched across the table to hand her the box of tissues, and to take her hands and he held them despite the fact that she wanted to blow her nose.

Caleb was trapped between the window and Halsey's giant body. He leaned toward Rachel. "If you had to choose between those shapes you see, and a baby," Caleb said, "which would it be?"

"That's a stupid game," Rachel said. "A bunch of false what-ifs for no reason."

"She's right," Halsey said.

"I'd like to know," Caleb said. "If you had to choose between having a family, and being able to see the things you see, you *used* to see, what would you choose?"

"I'd choose both," Rachel said.

"You just told me you can't do what you did because you're pregnant. What if that's the price? What if you have to give up having children? Would you do it? Are you willing to do that?"

Halsey let go her hands, turned toward Caleb. "She doesn't want to answer," he said. His head ducked low as if, Caleb thought, he was getting ready to jab him with horns.

"What if you had to give all of us up?" Caleb said. "Mom, Dad, me and Noah and Micah, Leah and Hannah, all of us. Would you give up your gift, or whatever it is, for us?"

Halsey stared at him, his hands flexing on the table like he wanted to use them on Caleb, but Caleb could manage only to stop talking. He turned from Halsey to stare intently at Rachel, who looked back at him, her brows furrowed in fear, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“Yes,” she finally said. “Yes, I’d give it all up.” She reached for Halsey’s hand. “What I might do in my work is not worth the price of losing any of you.”

Caleb turned toward the window, unable to sustain her stare. The rust colored fence glowed in the dying light, and on the other side of it, the gray brick edifice shimmered, pulsed as if it were the skin of a living animal. Summer had finally come to Oregon, Caleb thought. It had arrived days ago and he hadn’t noticed. Not really.

“I don’t believe you,” he finally said. “I don’t. I think you’d give up everything to have that back.”

FOR ALL THAT had happened, dinner was as easy as if they had only met that day. Ruth sat at the head of the table, asked about the spices she had added to the pasta, could they taste this one, or that one. Gabriel talked about the architectural oddities they had introduced in the house, chuckling once in awhile as if remembering only jokes with the construction workers. When he and Ruth had begun remodeling, they had planned a hallway beside the stairs to the basement bypassing the kitchen entirely, a sort of “secret passage” to the dining room, but had never gotten around to it. Ruth had gotten pregnant with Rachel at the time, Gabriel said, but Ruth said that no, she had already had the children by then, and they laughed as they seemed to make one mistake in memory after

another. And then Ruth said, “I guess we’ll never get around to it now,” and with that, the conversation lulled, despite forks against plates, Halsey accidental slurp of his wine.

Micah rescued the situation, speculating aloud about where he was going to go, that he was going to tell the cabin in Colorado and move to San Francisco. He had a lot of college friends there he wanted to look up. They were making mountains of money in computers: all to the better for his writing. Then he thought that perhaps Seattle might be even better. Remote, perhaps even gloomy and depressing, as far as the weather was concerned, but it was what he liked. “It’s much easier to write,” he said, “when you can’t watch shadows move across your room hour after hour.”

Rachel and Halsey said nothing about Rachel’s condition, and though they sat together, looked kindly at one another, at least as far as Caleb could tell, he thought there was a hint of distance. He was convinced that he was right about what she would be willing to do, and he suspected that despite Halsey’s protests, he was as sure as Caleb was.

Caleb said that he was going to visit Hannah in British Columbia, then fly back to New York, try to get a job, get on by like he was always getting on by. Plans were futile, he admitted, trying to make light of it. Everyone smiled at him, no one laughed. He felt as if, when they spoke, he wore a massive bandage on his head, the red spot growing with every word.

And then Ruth, after serving cheesecake, after waiting until they had all set down their forks, announced that she was going to live with Noah and Sheila for a while, until the divorce was final. Caleb felt a tremor run through him, felt his stomach drop for a

moment, but then the wave passed. Of course. He supposed it was only natural. He looked at the others. Micah looked as if he were still wearing his sunglasses. He smiled a little, pressed his fork into his plate and slipped the crumbs into his mouth. Halsey looked down, seemed as embarrassed and respectful as he might have been if they had just spent the past twenty minutes trading clichés in a prayer circle. Rachel glared at Ruth, then at her father, then got up and left the room. Halsey followed her.

“Well,” Micah said. “I guess I’ve been expecting it for years.” He shrugged. “Let me know how I can help.”

Gabriel looked at his watch. “We should be at the airport in an hour,” he said. “Will you make sure your sister is all right?”

“Don’t worry Dad,” Micah said. He carried his dishes into the kitchen. “Won’t be long before we’re all gone.”

Ruth rolled her eyes, glanced at Gabriel, touched his hand, and then let it rest there. Caleb couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen them do that. He looked at them, at each of their faces: his father’s old, and though he rarely changed expressions, there seemed a lively, youthful intelligence under his bushy white brows. His mother, twelve years younger than her husband, seemed as old as he, though her skin was not weathered, nor were the lines around her eyes and mouth pronounced, but there was something tired and drained about her eyes, the way they sloped down to either side of her face, as his did.

“Did you know?” Caleb said to his father.

“No,” his father said. “But we’d been separated for years.” He glanced at her, smiled, seemed, to Caleb, almost to wink. “Figuratively speaking.” Caleb didn’t understand what they were giving up, though that maybe they weren’t giving up anything.

“That man?” Caleb said to his mother.

“Nothing,” she said. “I think you got that all wrong, you know.”

“No affair?” Caleb said.

“Well,” she said, and then glanced at Gabriel, the slight tremor of a worry crossing her face. “Not really.” But Caleb didn’t believe her. She wouldn’t look at him, instead glanced at the plates and silverware still littering the table. Later that night, his father stopped by Caleb’s room on his way up to the attic.

“She has a secret life,” he said. “Somewhere in there. Time for her to let it out.”

“Should we all,” Caleb said, though he hadn’t meant anything by it except to sound interestingly cryptic and learned in front of his father. He couldn’t help himself.

IN THE MIDDLE of the night, Caleb stared for a moment at the mobile turning and turning, found himself before long heading toward the attic and his father’s door. He stopped himself, turned around, went down stairs and called Michelle’s apartment on the ancient kitchen phone. The phone rang, and then Michelle’s message spoke, the same one she’d had for the past year. He called Barnes and Noble. Someone was still there and explained to him that she was out west visiting her boyfriend, in Portland, or Seattle, or Los Angeles, it was all the same to him, frankly. He went upstairs, put on a heavy shirt

and some sweatpants and walked outside. He'd forgotten shoes. The cement was cold, and the air chilled enough to send a shiver through him when he stood beside the mailbox, looking at the cavernous sky above choked thick with stars. He listened for a car coming up the drive, listened even for a horn calling from the river. He let the tightness in his throat and chest harden until he trembled with more than chill, and then he let it go, and went back inside.

CHAPTER 14

FOR LUCK, CALEB took a shower. Light had only just begun to peek through the steamed window, and the water, hard and hot, was a thousand tiny fingers poking at him. He had awakened cold, noticed that the vent had stopped breathing, that the mobile hung still, a faint shadow above the closet. The heat began to soak into him and he let it go on until his fingers were wrinkled, until he began to wonder if the water were going to wear his hair away. Even the towel felt good, the shock of the bathroom's steamy coldness when he stepped onto the cold floor.

He looked at himself in the mirror after dressing. His face was as thin as it had been in New York. Dark whiskers filled in the hollows of his cheeks, and his eyes sloped so much, they seemed about to slide off his face.

"I look like an insect," he said, then bared his teeth, sucked at them in the reflection.

OUTSIDE, MICHELLE WAITED for him, standing against the passenger door of her rental car, a dusty maroon Ford Escort. Caleb stopped, his mother's keys still dangling in his hands. The day had dawned beautiful, the air cool and still, the neighborhood steeped in shadow except for the roofs glowing yellow as the sun rose over the mountains to the east, over the trees behind his parents' house. Michelle seemed to him more beautiful

than she had ever been. She had gotten a hair cut, her hair once again straight, falling just below her jaw line. The skin above her T-shirt collar where it was palest, the place between the swell of her breast and the suppleness of her neck seemed to him the most fragile thing he had ever seen.

“Are you ready?” she said, her voice throaty, hoarse.

He put his hand up, ducked back into the house and put the keys in the bowl. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then followed her into the car. He asked where she had been, told her he had called New York looking for her, that he had been thinking he might try the police next, missing persons, the whole deal. She wouldn’t say anything.

“I don’t understand why you came back,” he said. “I don’t understand why you ever come back.”

She sighed heavily, gripped the wheel tighter, and kept on driving. The countryside was beautiful, the landscape covered, at first, with scrub oak and bright green grass, the land flat, slowly bunching, as if the mountains ahead kept from floating by the strength of their knuckled grip on the land. As they began to rise through the foothills, spiky boulders began to appear between the trees, growing in number, the left over remains of a prehistoric explosion.

“The thing is,” she finally said, “is that I love you.”

“Oh,” Caleb said.

They continued in silence until Caleb brought out Hannah’s map and they made the first turn. Michelle turned sharply onto the two lane road, banging Caleb’s head against the window. She hadn’t seemed to notice.

“There’s still time,” Michelle said. “We could turn around right now, head back. I checked the schedules. There are seats available on all the planes.”

“That never happens,” Caleb said.

“Do you think I’m lying?” she said. “I checked.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Caleb said. “You can stay in the car. I’ll hike in there, take a look around—I’m sure it won’t be anything. These things never are. The memory is always better.”

“I shouldn’t even be here in the first place,” she said. They pulled hard onto another road switch backing up the mountain’s northern shoulder. “I can tell you’re going to be nothing but trouble. I can tell.”

“But you love me,” he said.

“I do,” she said.

“And so you’ll go along with me,” he said.

“That’s right,” she said.

“*That’s* why I love *you*,” he said. “You stick with me.”

“It’s too much to ask, you know,” she said.

“I know,” he said.

“It takes two to make these things work,” she said, “and I haven’t seen you working.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She slowed down. They were nearing the place where the map said they’d find a small parking lot. Caleb admitted that he didn’t recognize a thing, that he was amazed

Hannah had made the map. Perhaps she had sent them on a wild goose chase.

Nevertheless, they moved forward, and then they found it, a small gravel parking lot lined with creosote logs and a brown sign announcing the three-mile hike to the mud springs, and the three-mile hike beyond that to another parking lot alongside the highway. “Stunning views,” the sign added, and indeed, Mt Hood loomed above them snow-capped and silent, its head blocking the sun from its shadowy blue and gray flanks.

There were no other cars, and when Caleb got out, he looked in a garbage can beside the trail entrance. Empty. He told Michelle that no one had been on the trail since he and Raymond took it twelve years before. “Fate!” he exclaimed. She didn’t get out of the car, and she didn’t laugh. Caleb got back in.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “Soon as we get down there, the sooner back. I’m starved, how about you?”

She ran her hands along her hair, pressed it down as if expecting the curls to appear at any moment. “Did you know they had you hooked up to a heart monitor that last time?” she said. “I watched it until it made me sick. Your heart beat at thirty-five beats a minute for over twelve hours.”

“I was in a trance,” Caleb said, smiling. Despite the midmorning sun, the air was cool and would make them cold unless they got hiking.

“I’m serious,” Michelle said. “You could have died. I really think you’re practicing up for it.”

“Don’t be silly,” he said.

“Caleb,” she said, turning toward him, then grabbing his arm and squeezing.
“Listen to me.”

Caleb jerked his arm away and got out of the car. He walked toward the trail, stopped, came back around until he faced her through the driverside window. “Pop the trunk,” he said.

“Caleb,” she said.

“Do it now,” he said.

She stared at him for a moment, as if seeing for the first time, Caleb thought, that he did indeed look like an insect. Then she leaned forward, popped the trunk. Caleb shifted her suitcase around, felt under the edges and found what he was looking for, a flashlight. He slammed the trunk and walked as quickly as he could down the trail, kicking at pebbles and, once, stumbling over a root that had pushed its way from under a rock. After a few minutes, he slowed down, nearly exhausted with the effort and from the lack of food, and then he noticed that Michelle was following him. He stopped, waited for her to catch up.

“Don’t say anything,” she said, and then waited while his panting slowed.

“Thirty-eight?” Caleb said.

“Thirty-five.”

CALEB WALKED SLOWLY, he told himself, because of the weakness his stay in the hospital, his days in bed, had produced in him. He joked about it to Michelle, telling her that there was something wrong with the world when you came out of the hospital worse

off than when you went in. “You were unconscious,” she said, and then pulled in front of him. He watched the back of her neck for a while, never having noticed the tiny bony knobs from the edge of her hair to her shirt. He wanted to kiss one of them, but his stomach had begun to sink and stay sunk, and his legs were as numb as they might have been had he already run for a mile.

They followed a long slow curve and emerged from under the cover of scrub oak to see a meadow sweep shallowly before them, the trail following the line where a low, barren hill broke into lush grass. Beyond the meadow, the hills swept back, one on top of another, until Mount Hood rose above, looming like a title wave. Caleb had to stop for a moment, control his breathing, slow it down. Michelle continued on. She was nearly across the meadow before she stopped, looked back at him, waved. He waved back. A breeze picked up, tossed stalks of grass around, sending particles into the sky. From around Mount Hood, and the other mountains like outstretched arms around it, a few puffy clouds peaked, and then rushed forward. At first, Caleb expected a storm, but the clouds detached themselves from the mountaintop and scooted West.

Caleb snapped awake when he heard Michelle yelling at him, her voice small and distant in the face of the view. He hurried toward her and together they walked into a conifer forest. The trail hugged the high ground. The cedars grew taller as they moved, and the underbrush lessened until they could see far down the slope to tiny meadows almost on fire in shafts of sunlight. Caleb stopped, touched Michelle’s arm.

“I remember this,” he said. “Something like this.”

“It’s beautiful,” Michelle said.

THE FOREST SLOPED into a valley while the trail climbed. Soon Caleb and Michelle found themselves on a barren hillside dotted in scrub oak, white boulders and yellow/white grass. Caleb stopped. His legs, still numb, seemed to have gained strength with the walk, but the rest of him was weakening. He couldn't focus on the trail, stumbled easily over exposed roots, kicked pebbles into the underbrush, scraped his heels. And from somewhere, a rushing noise.

"Are you all right?" Michelle said. She grabbed his shoulders, peered into his face as if he weren't looking back at her. "If something happens and we're up here on this mountain. . . ."

"Worry," Caleb said. "Go ahead. I don't mind. Worry all you want."

She let go of him.

"There's something wrong," he said. "I don't remember this."

They walked until the hill began to slope downward. He hadn't remembered a hill, hadn't remembered any part of the trail as treeless as this. He hadn't remembered the meadow, either. He took out Hannah's map, scanned it, but it revealed nothing except blue lines, a red stripe, and Hannah's thick black lines. He rubbed the back of his neck, looked into the sky, felt the sun on his face.

"Maybe we can find a ranger who'll tell us where it is," Michelle said. "Or better yet, we can go home."

He opened his eyes, started back, then stopped. Then he started again. He saw Michelle's shadow catch up to him, pass him. Nearly at the bottom of the hill, the cedars

in sight, he stopped, squatted, examined the ground. “Look at this,” he said, pointing.

“The old trail.”

“They changed the trail?”

He stepped over the crumbling embankment, pulled himself up with the help of branches, turned to help Michelle who was having an easier time of it. After a moment’s walk, they hit an old trail, littered with leaves, stones, branches, followed it as it hugged the barren hill toward a ridge.

“I think this is it,” Caleb said.

Michelle moved closer to him, grabbed his hand. He squeezed, then pressed ahead as fast as he could until, after an almost imperceptible descent, the trail grew wide enough for a vehicle. Caleb remembered this, from twelve years before, and from his dream in the church before his collapse. This was the place. He listened for the sound of a ten-speed, heard instead only the white noise of wind and stream. He put his arm around Michelle, wanted to draw her closer.

And then there it was. The mine shaft, the opening smaller than he remembered. He’d have to crouch if he went into it. He stopped and stared, held on to Michelle until she complained that he was hurting her. When he let go, his legs slowly gave out until he was sitting on the ground. It *did* look like an enormous eye, the edges white, the center, absolute darkness, above, dead white grass like an old man’s eyebrows, like his father’s eyebrows, and to one side, the roots from a dead tree gripped the upper opening and dangled two fingers which waved in the breeze, tapping, or beckoning.

Michelle sat beside him. “You should have eaten something before we left,” she said. “How come you didn’t think of that?”

“I can’t go in,” Caleb said. “I can’t do it.”

Michelle caressed his cheek, pushed stray hair behind his ear. “So it’s true,” she said.

“No,” he said. “He didn’t do anything to me. I’m sure of it.”

“Oh,” she said.

“You don’t believe me?” he said. “Do you?”

“Do you believe that nothing happened when I was abducted?” she said. “You don’t think someone molested me, that the reason I can’t remember a whole lot is because it was horrible?”

“I don’t believe that,” he said, but when he looked at her, her pale skin, her eyelids slightly dark, slightly blue, her new bangs tapping her forehead and temples as if trying to remind her of something, he was convinced that something *had* happened. She didn’t remember and he did. That was the difference. He wanted to say something, but instead, he turned back to the cave.

“I just need to rest for a minute,” he said.

“Okay,” Michelle said. She rested his hand on his shoulder, then her head, finally massaging his other shoulder, and then his chest until her hand came to rest above his heart, which beat slowly, steadily, as he waited for the right moment.

“YOU KNOW, THIS is kind of exciting,” Michelle said. Caleb felt as if his skin and muscle had been purged from his body, that he had become nothing but a scarecrow made of nerves, felt as if his body were conducted too much energy.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said.

He took the flashlight out of his pocket, switched it on, and with Michelle just behind him, they went in. Their gravelly steps echoed off the wall, the sound of their clothes against their bodies sounded like whispers. Caleb noted the smell, like an old garage in which cardboard boxes, year after year, and absorbed rain. When they reached the end of the natural light, they followed the shaft’s slow turning toward the left until they were in full dark. Caleb played his flashlight against the walls, moving the beam rapidly, hoping the shaft would seem lighter. And then they were at the end, at the point where the tunnel simply ended. Michelle felt the wall of ragged white stone and quartz, rubbed her index and thumb together. “I feel like I’m in one of those old books,” she said. “Kind Solomon’s Mines.”

Caleb glared at her until he realized she couldn’t see him. “Okay,” he said. “You sit there.” He pointed to a place just before the entrance to the mine shaft’s end. Michelle sat down, pulled her legs together, looked up at him. The tunnel had seemed smaller until he sat down. He pushed the flashlight butt end in the gravel, looked up at the ring it made on the ceiling. He explained to Michelle that he was going to turn off the light, and she was to sit, empty her mind, think of a candle, if she had to think of anything, the way it shifted once in a while in a still room, the way the wax glowed,

pooled around the flame, the blue aura, the black wick. She was to let go until something happened.

“Are you going to make something happen?” she said.

“No,” he said. “Absolutely not.”

He reached out, switched off the light, and when he withdrew his hand, he knocked the light over. He waited for a moment, the red and green lightening hinting at its existence, for Michelle to say something, do something, move, but she didn’t.

NOTHING CAME FLOODING back, no revelations, no visions, but he remembered things clearly. Raymond had leaned forward, had touched his knee, had whispered, “Caleb, hold on a minute buddy.” Caleb had complained that his back hurt. That was the problem. His back hurt, and so Raymond had helped him into the lotus position, something he himself couldn’t do. Caleb was young enough and flexible enough. “This’ll keep your back straight,” Raymond had said. “But my legs hurt,” Caleb had said. Raymond had touched them again, had held Caleb’s knees. “Relax your legs,” he said. “Imagine yourself about to fall asleep.” Caleb had struggled, and then he had managed to let go. He felt a warmth at his lower spine, and then numbness. He had been unable to tell when Raymond had let go. And then the rest was as he remembered it. All that geometry.

The red and green flickered across the darkness, but nothing else happened. He listened for Michelle, heard her faint, steady breath. He could sense her worry, her fear. In the darkness, she seemed a greater darkness, just there in front of him. She knew

something he didn't yet know, he was sure of that too. His mind wandered. He remembered a time when Raymond had taken him to a neighborhood carnival to ride the Ferris wheel. Caleb had bugged him about it for days, but once on, once over the top, the car swinging what seemed miles above the drug store parking lot, he started screaming and crying, wanted Raymond to make the man stop the machine so he could get off. Raymond only laughed. He thought about Michelle looking with horror at a hot dog stand while Caleb ordered up a huge one with all the cheese and onions he could get. He remembered the look on his mother's face as she sat at the table in the *Elsinore*, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening, her teeth showing, her head back, her fingers tapping, dancing on the rim of a glass of ice water.

He detected in Michelle, or imagined, he no longer cared, there in the darkness, which it was, a vast and bottomless calm and he knew, *knew* that she would get over him, that she had already gotten over him, and beyond that, he knew that he had gotten over her.

HE'D FALLEN ASLEEP in the car as they'd driven back to Portland. They hadn't talked to each other on the hike back, Caleb stumbling the whole way, holding on to Michelle, who wasn't having an easy time if it either.

She nudged him awake as they approached the city limits. She asked if he wanted to get something to eat, and he said he did. They ended up at the pizza place across from Powell's Books, two giant triangles in front of them. Caleb wasn't hungry until he took the first bite, and then he ate non-stop until Michelle interrupted him.

“So,” she said. “You weren’t molested.”

“No,” he said. “Either that, or my delusion of what happened was confirmed and made stronger.”

“Confirmed and made stronger,” she said. “And what happened?”

“I had a vision,” he said.

“Not an epileptic episode,” she said.

“Who is to say that visions don’t happen by some means?” he said. “Why do we assume it has to be a bolt out of the blue? Maybe I was genetically destined to have them? Or at least that one.”

“Already,” she said, applying her fork to her barely eaten slice, “I’m tired of this conversation.”

Caleb raised his hands. “Okay,” he said. “All right.”

It was only just after lunch, the sidewalks still crowded. People streamed in and out of Powel’s. “Have you ever been there?” Caleb said. “The competition?”

“No,” Michelle said. She pushed her pizza away.

The two of them watched the city. From where they sat, they could see down a street leading to the Willamette river, which lay dark gray beneath a dark red bridge, the sky white-blue. Sea gulls floated above the street, riding a thermal between two tall buildings. The sun was directly above and out of sight, and not a single shadow followed or led the pedestrians as they hurried, purses tucked under arms, newspapers rolled in fists, along the sidewalks. It had been a rare few days of sun, and though the people

didn't smile any more than they usually did, they seemed to stand a little closer to one another, seemed to see each other a little more.

"I'm not going to go back to New York," Caleb finally said. He looked at Michelle, saw that she had already started to cry. He reached for her hand, but she wouldn't let him take it. "I have to find him," he said.

"I thought you already knew," she said.

Caleb said nothing. He rolled up his napkins, the crust of his pizza, dumped them in the trashcan behind him. He reached for Michelle again. She leaned back, folded her hands on her lap. "The truth is," he said, "I miss him. It's that simple. He's up there, or near there, and I have to try."

"Oh," she said. "And when you find him, you can come back to New York, right? You can start. . . ." The tears began to turn her eyes and cheeks red. She pulled her T-shirt's sleeve down, folded her arm inside her shirt and pressed the sleeve to her face. "This is really stupid of me," she said. "I knew this was going to happen. I told you this was going to happen."

Caleb wasn't sure what it was. Perhaps the food. Perhaps the sunlight, so strange in the city, the summer having been plagued by storms. Perhaps even Michelle's tears, how horrible he felt, as if his entire body were trying to shrink. Whatever it was, a tremor ran along his arms and legs, an intense and deeply present excitement. It seemed to him that it had been there since his mother had called.

He wanted to tell Michelle that if he went back with her, he'd fade in and out, fall into apathy, or depression or whatever it was. He no longer thought this was true. He

wanted to tell her that he loved her, loved her more than anything, ached with it, sometimes. He remembered the night before, the cold street, the star-choked night sky. He wanted to say that he'd find her, that she shouldn't wait for him, shouldn't expect him, but he'd find her. Instead, he leaned forward, kissed her damp cheek.

In the end, it was he who stood at the airport, watching her plane disappear into the blue-misted evening sky.

CHAPTER 15

CALEB FOUND HIS mother in the basement in black pants, a white blouse, sleeves rolled to her elbows, her hair gathered and bunched at the back of her head. She was pressing a paint roller into its bin, getting it nice and soaked before she began covering the wall, the white paint swaths like new roads covering the countryside.

“Should have done this a long time ago,” she said.

“Can I help?” Caleb said.

Together they covered the entire wall, she the middles, Caleb the edges with a small brush. They listened to classical music on the radio, chatted about New York City, how sweltering and humid it was this time of year. His mother asked about Michelle, but all Caleb would say was, “We let each other go.” She rolled her eyes, but continued painting while Caleb took a moment to close his eyes. He asked her about the divorce. She said they’d planned it the year before, had the papers drawn up, but hadn’t got around to signing and finalizing, were sparked into action when Leah announced her plan to get married.

“Did Dad know about that guy?” Caleb said.

“No,” she said. “Your little bombshell hurt him terribly, Caleb, despite everything.”

When they had finished the wall, they leaned against the pool table covered in plastic and took a look. The basement seemed smaller, and, somehow, naked, the kind of nakedness one sees at a nudist colony, dull and without mystery.

“I wish you had left it,” Caleb said.

“Those horrors?”

“For the next people,” he said. “I like to think those paintings will always be there.”

The fluorescent lights buzzed over them as they stood, and then as if jolted, Ruth gathered the bins and brushes and began to wash them in the large concrete sink in the corner. Caleb stared at the blank wall, at the glossy white paint, though he could see the barest hint of the gothic window outlines the paintings had fit.

“Were those paintings here before you put in the windows upstairs?” Caleb said.

“You don’t remember?” his mother said. “That’s where I got the idea. Seven paintings, seven children.”

Caleb turned to his mother. Despite the past several hours worth of work, her faded jeans and gray sweatshirt remained spotless. He told her he was going to Canada, to visit Hannah and Bob and the twins, and that he hoped to find Raymond there, and if he didn’t, he might look for a job, if that was possible, being that he’d be a foreigner. And for some reason, he couldn’t stop thinking of Wyoming, not the actual place—he’d never been there—but the sound of the word, Why Oh Ming. It reminded him of dreams.

His mother stopped cleaning, stared at his face intently as if examining it for disease or lies. “Am I ever going to see you again?”

“Of course,” Caleb said. “I might sneak in, down there, so I can see you and not the others, but you’ll see me, Mom, of course. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking you’re going to disappear, like Raymond did.”

“You’ll always find me in Wyoming,” he said. The idea appealed to him. The paintings were gone. The house might be sold, probably would be. His family had split into families, Rachel the last, and Caleb imagined himself destined, if not for something in particular, than for something in general, a person who wanders. He saw himself wandering across Wyoming, just him, a leather jacket, a backpack, a pair of thick-soled boots. For a moment, the image captured him, but then, when his mother started the tap water again, he let it go.

Caleb tamped down the paint can lids, scraped excess paint from the edges with a screwdriver while Ruth ran the water over the brush Caleb had used, her thumb working the white paint from handle to bristles, spilling it onto the sink’s uneven surface where it collected into tiny cloudlike pools.

“Do you think Raymond did something to me?” Caleb said. “Molested me, or something like that?”

“How can I answer that?” she said.

“Why wouldn’t I remember?” he said. “Do you think he was capable of it?”

She snapped her fingers of water, set the paintbrush down and pushed back her hair. “Yes,” she said. “I think he was. We’re all capable of such things, aren’t we?”

“No,” Caleb said quickly. “We’re not.”

She shrugged, grabbed a towel and wiped her hands.

“I knew him,” Caleb said. “Maybe best of all, better even than Dad. He wouldn’t have done something like that.”

“Well,” his mother said. “Then there you have it.”

A few days later Caleb and his father saw her to the airport. She was heading to the Bay Area to find a place to live. Noah was to meet her and she would stay with him and her grandchildren for several weeks while she made arrangements for a place of her own, while Gabriel decided if he were going to sell the house. At the window, as his mother’s plane taxied toward the runway, Caleb watched his father stare after her, his hair snow white, his face clean shaven, his jowls squaring his jaw line. He waited for his father to say something, to show something, but all he saw was the absence of his delicate, knowing smile, and then it was there, and his father turned to him.

“I’m starving,” he finally said. “Where shall we eat?”

TWELVE THIRY-FOUR IN the morning. The house was silent. Caleb listened for a hint of movement. Nothing. Since his mother had left, Caleb had done almost nothing except sleep, go on long walks with his father. They never talked about anything except to say, “Look at that,” or “Still, no clouds! What’s become of Oregon!” At night, Caleb sometimes stared at the mobile when he awoke in the middle of the night, had renamed it the immobile. He liked the idea, the asymmetrical forms perfectly suspended, frozen, he sometimes thought, or perfectly at rest.

He pulled on his jeans, a sweatshirt, went to his parents’ bedroom, and as he suspected, his father wasn’t there. He found a stool and sat next to his mother’s side of

the bed, hunched over. The moonlight was bright enough to turn the room into something mysterious, the reflections and shadows and gleaming edges becoming any number of animals or machines.

He was going to leave the next day, had renewed his passport, had bought a bus ticket, had called Hannah and Bob.

He climbed to his father's attic office. The thick, heavy door was ajar, faint yellow light pouring out, breaking one darkness from another. His father was reclined at his desk, his face pointed up, his hands on his chest. He was sleeping, his mouth absurdly open, his eyes darting beneath thick eyelids, bushy eyebrows. Caleb sat down in the only chair and watched his face, which seemed—after all that had happened in his life: the loss of two wives, the loss of his favorite son, the dispersal of his family—happy. When Caleb shifted in the chair, his father closed his mouth, grumbled something, then opened his eyes and fixed on Caleb.

“Have you been here long,” he said, “watching an old man sleep?”

“Not long,” Caleb said.

A conscious silence fell between them. Caleb looked for that certain turn of smile at the edges of his father's mouth. The shadow line his eyebrows and eye ridges made over his face. His folded hands, his square jowls. Gone.

“Dad,” Caleb said. “Why did you go through with it? The divorce?”

“It was time,” he said. “We needed a change.”

“Go to the Caribbean,” Caleb said. “Sell the house, wear silk underwear. *That's* a change. Why this?”

“Well,” he said. “There was that other man.”

“Oh,” Caleb said. “I’d forgotten.”

“I suppose I thought we’d never sign the papers,” he said. “But I suppose it was what she wanted.”

Caleb talked about his plans, Canada, Wyoming, Raymond, while his father looked at him as if he were more interested in the fact that Caleb were speaking than what he was saying.

“There’s something wrong in your brain,” he finally said. “You need to know that.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Caleb said, waving his words away. “I think it’s over now.”

“No,” he said. “I had you checked when you were a baby. You scared us, you know, even in the crib. You’d fall asleep, and your breath was so shallow, your heart so slow, we thought you were going to die on us. All but destroyed your mother.” They had taken Caleb in for tests, his father said, but the doctors could find nothing wrong, told Ruth that it might be nothing, might be a bizarre form of epilepsy, anything. They’d had a fight over it, Ruth and Gabriel. She wanted to let the doctors take care of Caleb, look for solutions, try out drugs, new treatments, eventually, perhaps, even electroshock, and his father would have none of it. “We’ll give him plenty of vitamins,” he’d told her. In some ways, this might have been the beginning of the end of their marriage.

“And it took twenty-five years and another kid to figure that out?” Caleb said.

“Rachel was unplanned,” Gabriel said. “And there was passion, for many years.”

The only other person who knew about Caleb’s problem was Raymond, who had snuck

into his father's office and rifled through the papers until he found out. "No keeping secrets," his father said, "and back then, Raymond was intensely interested in secrets."

"So he knew?" Caleb said.

"Yes," his father said

"So all along, all those times we spent together, he knew something was going on in my brain?"

"Yes," Gabriel said. "I suppose that's true."

"So that time, in the cave—"

"Who knows?" his father said. He sat forward, stood, walked to the other end of the attic. Caleb had never seen him, had never seen anyone, in that part of the room.

"He thought that these spells I had," Caleb said, "were a way to contact something, didn't he?"

His father, quietly, said, "At one time, he might have thought that." He walked back toward Caleb, then stood beside the open door, holding it.

Caleb stared at his own hands, rethought all those moments he had remembered, how Raymond had caught him when he learned to walk, had taken him to the dam to see the spillway from a great height, had refused to let him off the Ferris wheel. Caleb found himself intensely curious about Raymond, more than he had ever been, and curious about himself, as well. While Caleb had seen himself as going no where, as turning as pointlessly as the mobile on his bedroom ceiling, Raymond had seen him going somewhere.

"I'm going to go to bed," his father said.

Caleb looked at his father, who seemed out of focus for a few seconds. “All right, Dad,” Caleb said. “You’ll be up to take me to the station tomorrow?”

As they walked down the stairs together, his father said, “I want you to remind him of me.”

“Him?” Caleb said.

“When you find Raymond, when you meet him,” his father said, “I want you to remind him of me. It’s important.”

“I will,” Caleb said.

IN THE EARLY afternoon several days later, Caleb showed up at Hannah and Bob’s house. Their daughters answered the door, recognized Caleb as the guy who fell down at the wedding, took him into a small parlor area, dark wood paneling, red velvet chairs, where Bob sat reading, his beard and chin on his chest, his half-lens glasses on a cord around his neck.

They talked a little about Caleb’s experiences in the hospital, about the fact that Hannah was at the site covering up the tables and battening down the tents. It was raining, if he hadn’t noticed. She liked to keep the site open as long as possible, much to her drenched graduate student assistants’ irritation, but the last moment had been reached.

“She’ll be back soon,” Bob said. “Stay, make yourself at home. God, it’s been years since you’ve visited!”

Caleb headed out. “I’ll surprise her,” he said.

On the porch, he held out his hands, caught snowflakes. Bob shivered beside him. “You know,” he said. “Things are good between us. We’ve fallen in love. We hold on to each other at night and talk. She does most of it. First time since before we were married.”

“That’s good,” Caleb said.

“I want to thank you for that,” he said.

“No need,” Caleb said. “I had nothing to do with it.”

“You did,” he said, and handed Caleb directions.

The storm had brought evening very early and when he got out to the dig site, it was almost full dark. He caught a glimpse of Hannah near the group of dark shapes. She was pulling a last blue tarp over something large, tying it down, shaking her hands to keep them warm. She brushed water from her collar, laughed, clapped her hands, and resumed working.

There was a light far across the field, where the road, Caleb guessed, bent around on its way along the small creek in this part of the valley.

“Hi,” Hannah said, suddenly in front of him. “Dad said you were coming.”

He gave her a hug. “Bob said it was because of me that you two were together.”

“That’s right,” she said.

“It’s not true,” Caleb said.

“Maybe not directly,” Hannah said. They walked toward the parking lot, where Caleb’s rental car was parked. They talked a little about the risks he was taking, driving when at any moment he might pass out. Caleb admitted he was willing to take the risk,

and even if no one else believed him, and in spite of any medical science to the contrary, he was certain that he would know if something was going to happen, or that in the end, he was done with such things.

“That’s what it is about you,” Hannah said. “Your imagination. You can imagine anything is true.”

“I can?”

“That’s why you saved my marriage,” she said. “I dreamed it into life, like you dreamed up Raymond.”

“This is where you met him?”

They were leaning against the car, the rain coming down steadily from dark clouds. The site perched on a gently sloping hillside, consisted of several covered pavilions, stacks of lumber, bags of cement. The hill sloped down a meadow, an old farm, Caleb assumed, to a stream marked by overarching oaks, dark green-black bushes. Hannah pointed halfway down the slope. “Somewhere over there,” she said. “That’s where I met him.”

Caleb started into the field. Hannah followed him. “Show me the exact spot,” he said.

They stood near a clump of grass, the site pavilions somewhere behind them, the slope stretched before them, the grass stooped, heavy with water. The clouds had thickened the sky into near nightfall, but on the horizon, a thin line of light blue separated the low hills from their mirrors in the sky. To the left, the hills rose gradually into the clouds, the beginnings of coastal mountains, and to the right, the hills rose and fell again

into what Caleb assumed was a stretch of plains, or forest, or farmland. Somewhere between two hills, a plume of smoke rose into the sky. A small town, Hannah explained. A bar, a store, a coffee shop, a trailer park, a few old farm houses.

Caleb fumbled his keys out of his pocket, handed them to Hannah. “Make sure it gets back to an agency,” he said, then hugged her, the water falling from the brims of their rain hats onto their shoulders, from their shoulders to the grass.

“What are you doing, Caleb?” she said.

“I’m going to go find him,” he said, and then he started walking. He kept on walking across the field, even though Hannah followed him for a moment, talked to him, cajoled him. He didn’t really hear her, made her stop only when he said over his shoulder that he’d be back tonight, that he’d call, catch a ride, a taxi, a bus—whatever. The plume of smoke looked only an hour ahead, and the road swung down to meet him at the bottom of the hill. After a while, he didn’t even notice that the rain had stopped.

THE BAR WAS a two story shack surrounded by a filthy, oily parking lot, with a dozen pickups and a couple of sports cars lined up neatly in front. Inside, a man at the bar, shaggy, flannel-shirted, a little overweight, turned toward Caleb. “It’s not normally like a cave in here,” the man said, knocking on the bar, “but we’re out of light bulbs. You bring any with you?”

Caleb sat down, reached his hand across the bar and took Raymond’s. They had a whiskey each and then another and talked as Raymond served the other patrons, and when they were gone, Raymond fixed up a palette for Caleb, he being the bartender who

worked for room and board upstairs. At night, when he awoke as he always did, he found Raymond awake as well, though his face was to the wall. Caleb told him all that had happened, how he had missed him, about the weirdness in his brain. Raymond admitted that he had been interested, had spent long nights watching Caleb in his crib, his hand covering Caleb's entire chest, his heart beating like a long night's rain.

The room was the darkest place he had been in except for the cave. No lights, no clocks with glowing numbers. For a minute, the bar's freezer switched on, sending a dull vibration through the building's old wood, but then it switched off, doubling the silence.

"Raymond," Caleb said. "Do you know what they say? What Leah says, what Noah and Sheila said? They said you molested me, that time in the cave." At first Caleb thought Raymond had fallen asleep, and then, for a moment, he thought he saw Raymond looming over him in a broad brimmed hat, his hands twisted and huge, but then he heard laughing, a long, loud laugh which shook the room they were in. When Raymond had subsided, Caleb said, "So, did you? I mean, it doesn't really matter, not really, but I'm just kind of curious."

"No," Raymond said, the laughter in his voice a little husky, as if he had only just stopped crying.

"No?" Caleb said.

"No," Raymond said. "Back then, I thought you were a key. I don't even know what for anymore. I don't think about that stuff anymore. What an idiot I was!" He started laughing again, his loud guffaws, so like Leah's, subsiding into rumbling chuckles, and somewhere in there, Caleb, suddenly exhausted, fell asleep. He dreamed

of Michelle. She was in the Barnes and Noble Café, Caleb just the other side of the glass. She was staring at him, but when he moved, her eyes didn't, as if it wasn't him she was looking at.

OVER THE NEXT few days, Raymond said little about his life. He had wandered, he said. Had been married once, had a daughter somewhere, about eight, he thought, or seven, couldn't remember the exact date of his birth. "So many of these things in my life," he said as he and Caleb swept the bar before it opened, "just spin away. Just like that. As if someone opens a door and that leaf hanging on the edge of the porch leaps into the air, spins, and then boom, away."

TIME PASSED. CALEB didn't return to Hannah, nor did Hannah come to the bar looking for him. She must have known, on some level, as Michelle had known, as his mother had known, that they had spun away, like Raymond's leave of the porch, that he had spun away. Raymond was old now, too. In his early forties, but old. Hair shot with gray. Skin mottled and weathered, as if he had smoked too much, rode the range too much. Caleb found that he loved him as much now as he ever did. When he laughed at Caleb—whenever Caleb told him of his thoughts over the fast month or so—his ears, his big, dinner plate ears, got red, and this made Caleb laugh, reminded him of the ants they had watched that one afternoon. He was only a man, warm, friendly, kind—got along well with the customers, the farm hands who showed up in the early evenings, the academics who showed up later, but he didn't talk much about farming, or much about academics.

He remembered the stories the customers told, but when they were gone, Caleb could tell that for Raymond, they *were* gone, almost as if they had never been.

He was, in some way, self-contained, and distant. When Caleb stepped outside, or took a walk along an old farm road, he was certain that Raymond, back at the bar, had forgotten all about him. Raymond might have been crazy, but it was a crazy Caleb liked.

ONE NIGHT THE moon pushed through the window, brighter than a street light. Caleb had been dozing, dreaming of a giant hand on his chest, and when he woke up it seemed as if the moon had forced him into consciousness.

“Raymond?” he said. “Are you awake?”

No reply. Not the sound of breathing, nor the sound of the freezer. Caleb got up, stumbled around the room, tapped on the window glass while his eyes adjusted.

“Raymond?”

He stared at Raymond’s bed, at the wrinkled sheets, the disheveled covers. Quietly, surely, as if he had been born to walk in dark rooms, he approached Raymond’s bed, sat on the edge of it, felt the still warm sheets. He jumped up, ran to the door, opened it. “Raymond?” he said. “Are you there?”

Silence.

He sat on the bed again, then lay down on it, pulled Raymond’s blankets over his body, smelled the whiskey and sweat. He had forgotten to remind Raymond of their father, had forgotten about him himself, and for a moment, his throat thickened at the

thought of the old man sitting in the attic, his eyes closed against the ceiling, the smile playing on his face.

Caleb knew that in the morning he would be on the road to Wyoming. Perhaps Raymond was only out for a midnight walk, and would go with him, or perhaps he had continued on, spinning away, always spinning. As Caleb drifted into dream, he felt the syllables Why Oh Ming just below speech, felt it as a stranger might when he crested a long, slow prairie hill, when he saw for the first time the mist-bound wilderness.